



BLESSING

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Blessing

Florence Ndiyah



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Dedication

To my late father John Yuh N.

Appreciation

My deep gratitude goes to those who supported me financially and morally while I experimented with writing, especially Prof./Mrs. Ngundam. I am equally indebted to those who painstakingly read over the manuscript and offered invaluable advice: Mr. Julius Ngallah, Dr. Brenda Kombo, Ms. Aissatou Ngong. I also remember those who have always encouraged my writing endeavours, particularly Mrs. Fri Bime. Thanks to you all and to all those who contributed in one way or another towards the publication of this novel.

PART I

Thieves love the night because it protects them. What protects the night when it decides to steal? What gives it permission to act with such impunity? How could it steal so easily and pass so undetected? How could it mock them so? Why had it decided to make such a fool of them, drowning them in sleep while it operated silently? How could it have so betrayed the trust they had in it? The family wished they could understand just why the night had resolved to stealing so much from them. They wished it could explain why it had decided to sink the wick into the candle wax, condemning it to everlasting darkness. They wanted to know what could have made it decide to transform a few hours of rest for the body into a trip for a soul. Certainly not the slight fever the child had gone to bed with. What could the night have done to her to make her close her eyes to the approaching light of day? What could it have promised her to make her follow it to the place where it goes? The child had gone with the night. She had followed it to the place where it goes. She had accompanied it on the journey, conscious it will return the following evening without her. Like the trail of smoke rising and fading from a blown candle flame, her soul had risen to follow the night.

The family woke only to realize the child had followed the night to the place where it goes. They could almost see her disappearing with the last traces of night. They thought of giving chase but how could they? Daylight was approaching too fast, concealing the traces of the fading darkness. Standing in the yard, looking over the hills, they watched helplessly as part of them vanished. They knew they could not get back what the night had stolen from them. They yelled. They yelled at the night for being so cruel and heartless. They grieved at the loss of part of them. Scattered about the compound, their eyes cast skyward, arms akimbo, they mourned. The men sighed. The women wailed. Powerless, helpless, they grieved. Soon the neighbours joined in. Soon the whole village was grieving.

When the village grieved, the village grieved. Not one compound, not one soul was exempted. It was the job of the village crier to make sure the news got to every inhabitant of the village. A wooden baton in hand, he went around the village, beating the two iron cones of a gong, 'Dong Ding Dong. Dong Ding Dong.' The domineering sound of the church bells calling Catholic converts to morning Mass only urged him to beat harder and louder. The village crier marched around Mumba quarter beating his gong to the tune of death, the death of a child. 'Dong Ding Dong. Dong Ding Dong.' The rhythm of the beating gave out the simple message: 'Another skull lost forever'.

The very early risers, already on the way to their farms, dropped their hoes and stared after the bearer of the shocking message. Children did not die. Death was a thing experienced only by the old. It was a privilege, a reward for a long life. Only after a successful life on earth was a person raised to the rank of ancestor. Children just did not die. They lived. A child who died was a child who chose not to live.

Disbelief followed the village crier as he made the round of the village. His efforts were soon visible in the growing crowd that slowly assembled in the Fopou compound. Many came with questions: why had a child died? Others came with sympathy. The women. The mothers. Some wailed openly. Some cuddled other wailing women. Some shook their heads so hard and so often their lightly knotted headscarves dropped to the ground in protest. Some just sat still, staring at the disbelief all around, immobilized by its intensity. The stronger women quickly pushed aside the grief and went from one kitchen to the other, seeing to the cooking arrangements.

The men hung about in small groups of two, threes and fives, preoccupied with village customs and beliefs about the dead. The head of an 'ancestrally departed' was left in the grave only long enough for it to get rid of its flesh, after which it was exhumed, restored to life and handed over to the deceased's successor. The spirit of the deceased, embodied in the skull, then acted as a mediator – springing the people's petitions to the gods and showering the gods' blessings and curses on the people. While one school of

thought held that it was forbidden to restore life to children's skulls because their premature departure was evidence of their dislike for the land, another countered that children were not wise enough to intervene on behalf of grown-ups, insisting that poor comprehension was not a good trait for a broker, especially one whose job was to mediate between two worlds, between two kinds of entities, between the gods and men.

Had it been the death of an adult, everyone would have agreed that the customs were being respected: the women seeing to the food and the men, discussing culture and related issues in small groups. Yet this was the death of a child. Such preparations and discussions were permitted only after the burial, which had to take place within the hour following death. However, the little girl had been dead for close to two hours and she still had not been buried. Her body was still stretched out on the hay mattress, wrapped in her mother's best cloth. Such was the last sign of honour to a child who will never grow old enough to know elegance.

'I have spoken, Temkeu. This child has gone to visit the ancestors, and you know that she is not coming back. We will never see her again. We will never see her skull.' Mefo stood at one corner of the circular thatched hut. She appeared shorter without her headscarf. Of all women, a Mefo always had to cover her hair. This Mefo was a renowned traditionalist. This Mefo was also the child's grandmother. 'Temkeu, we need to put the child into her new home.'

It seemed as if there were several Temkeus in the hut, and that Temkeu Fopou, the child's father and Mefo's son was certainly not the one being addressed; he just sat at the corner of the hut, staring at the wall with blank eyes.

Tired of trying to reason with him, Mefo accused her son of betraying his manhood by disrespecting the gods' decree to immediately unite departed children with the earth. 'The people came to help you carry your pain' she said 'but you are driving them back to their farms. You sit there making as if you are the first to hold or taste pain. What pain even?' As she spoke, she picked up her headscarf from the floor and twisted and knotted it over her head. 'You will fool me only after you have fooled every person in this

village!’ Mefo stared at her son with a stabbing expression. ‘You think I do not know why you are clinging to that body? I know, Temkeu! I know. I like the way our people put it. They say that when a river starts swallowing a man, the man hangs on to anything, even grass which is being carried away by the same river.’

The picture she gave was one of an old woman who loved the sound of her voice. She was about start another round of monologuising when one of the elderly women walked into the hut, caught Mefo’s wrist in her fist and started towing her away. ‘You know you suffer from chronic headache attacks, Mefo. If you talk too much your sickness may start again.’

Mefo would not leave without a final warning: ‘If I come back and find that body still lying there,’ she said to Temkeu, ‘one of us, you or me, is going to take its place in that hole. One disaster is enough! I will not sit here and allow you to call the anger of the gods on this village. I will not allow you make the gods blacken another day with death. No! One disaster is enough!’

A sixty-seven-year-old woman, Mefo bore the title of Queen Mother more gracefully than most youths, the future. The royal title was conferred on a chosen female member of the *Fon*’s family, and it came with privileges usually not accorded to other women, especially not to single women. When Mefo approached, women bowed, men threw greetings. In a land where women needed permission to speak even among their gender, Mefo had a voice, a voice louder than that of most men. Elders and titleholders often sought her opinion.

Though many relatives and friends secretly discussed her obvious disgust for her only child, few wanted to walk about with the heavy weight of the legendary feud; fewer wanted to burn their fingers, not when the adopted enemy was to be Temkeu Fopou, a man who had proved he could challenge Mefo. Whether for the glory of proving he was tough or in retaliation to Mefo’s hostility towards him or for some other reason, no one really could tell.

Temkeu watched his mother walked out of his hut. He often described himself as the head of three women, pocket of thirteen children, proprietor of a compound with five huts, owner of two skulls and a belated titleholder. Yet he allowed a woman to talk down

to him. How his mother had come to have so much authority over him was a mystery. Her influence had reached the point where people at times described him as a fifty-two-year-old man who lived under the shadow of a woman. Even on such a day when he had refused to fight, she had still come after him, openly describing him as a problem too big for any solution. She challenged him. She put him on the same scale as boys who owned neither compounds nor skulls. Just how could he prevent her imposing presence from making him feel like a prisoner within his own bricks?

Temkeu got up from the stool where he had been sitting and walked towards the window. From the window to the door, from the three-stone fireplace to the built-in slab, he roamed about his empty hut with his hands folded across his chest. Almost two hours had gone by since the child's death. Those who had still been hanging around, hoping he would return to reason, had left one after the other. Those who were still hanging around were not about to get any satisfaction, for burial was the last thing on Temkeu's mind. First, he wanted to understand why death had visited his compound.

'Why?' he repeated. 'What did I do?' he asked his uncle and grandfather, or what remained of them. Their skulls sat on the slab built into the wall opposite his bed. A skull was a symbol of honour. He who lived with skulls lived with the blessings of the ancestors. He was a man among men. 'Why me?' Temkeu repeated. The only reply he got was the echoing sound of silence. That was all which emerged from the skeletal brain cases with deep eardrums, empty sockets and clenched teeth.

Like one who had received insight that the reply would come by action rather than words, Temkeu rushed to the bed and nudged the child slightly. She did not stir. He stared hard at her, and then as though for want of something better to do, sat down next to the body on the bed. He carried his chin in his right hand and closed his eyes. One hour went by before he opened his eyes again, this time to stare at his third wife, Nkem Fopou, the child's mother.

'Do you not think it is time to let her go?' she said. 'I have spent the last hour putting oil on the palms of family members. Yes, they have eaten the meat I put on their palms, washed their hands, and

now they are again threatening to return to their compounds and farms.'

As Temkeu looked up, the two relatives who had followed Nkem into the hut shushed each other to silence. They watched his every move and waited anxiously for his next word. However, Temkeu had no word for them. He ran his eyes over them and about the empty stools and then to his daughter's body. After a few minutes of futile waiting, Nkem beckoned her companions to follow her out of the hut. The women were already by the door when Temkeu let out, 'You can take her.'

The compound had been waiting for this moment. For almost three hours close family members, unable to walk away like most of the villagers, had waited for this moment when Temkeu would relinquish his grip on the body. Nkem stopped, turned around to face her husband but made no further effort to prove she had heard him.

'I have said that you should take her!' Temkeu barked. 'Take her from my eyes since that is what you want.'

While the two women rushed out to the yard to spread the news, Nkem walked towards the bed where her husband was still sitting. She stopped in front of it and looked down at her child. As she lifted her hand to touch her daughter's face one last time, Temkeu caught her wrist and spat out, 'You can take her from my eyes but you will never take her from my heart.'

Temkeu got up from the bed and surged past the door as though stung out of the hut. In the yard, he welcomed a soothing pat on his back and a few kind words from Angu Matamo, who assured him that the gods knew better.

'My calabash shattered before I was even able to drink from it,' was all Temkeu said.

'Our land is fertile but our women are more fertile, Angu said. 'If it means that we hack our way through, we will uncover that road which leads to a compound of fertile women, and we will pluck another ripe fruit for you. You will have another daughter, Temkeu. I will not sleep until it happens.'

Temkeu gave Angu a slight nod and dashed off before his friend could say more. He had hardly reached the middle of the square

compound fenced with five circular earth huts when people began thronging in from every shortcut. Elderly men limped in on staffs and women dashed in from nearby farms with heaps of earth on their hoes. Everyone had only one desire: to witness the longest burial ever. Some followed the corpse bearer into the hut, while others squashed around the gravediggers and the rectangular hole behind Temkeu's hut. A child, like any other woman who left the world without taking on a new surname or multiplying the village wealth in people, was always buried behind the compound, behind her father's hut. The sight of people eager to see his daughter lowered into the earth seemed unbearable to Temkeu. He held his heart as though it were a battlefield of two equally ferocious opponents – manhood taking it out on fatherhood. His feet changed direction. They were no longer facing the path out of his compound. They were looking towards the door of his hut. Temkeu slowly edged towards the crowd gathered at the door of his hut. He moved about on the fringe of the crowd for a while, and before anyone knew what he was up to, he was diving into the crowd.

'Wait! Wait,' he cried. Wading through the sea of people, he got into the hut to find the body already wrapped in white cloth and bound for the grave. 'Just one last time,' he pleaded. 'I beg to see her just one last time.' As he pushed forward those around the bed stepped aside, evidently too shocked to be upset. Even the corpse bearer made way for Temkeu, who responded by elevating his plea to another level: 'I need some minutes alone with my daughter.'

Everyone looked at him but no one complied.

'Well, it is just that I am a father, and I beg you to give me this last chance to pin my daughter's face on my heart. It will take just the same time it takes for you to walk out and close the door.'

His imploring eyes sent the crowd streaming outside. The corpse bearer, who had just given in to yet another request to free the child's face and torso from the confining burial cloth, trailed the queue.

Once silence took control over the hut, Temkeu pulled a stool and placed it near the head of the bamboo bed. He sat on the stool and stared at his daughter's still body. 'I waited forty-three long years to have you,' he said. 'By the time you arrived I was already an old

man. I came here before you. Why are you going away before me?' He sighed. 'I had plans for you. I thought that through you I was going to taste things that have already become like water to my friends. I thought that through you I was going to become a father-in-law to a man. So why have you gone and left me here, alone and hungry?'

Temkeu was silent for a few minutes, but it seemed the silence only reminded him of the reality. 'One woman, then a second woman and finally a third woman. I had to get three women before I could have you. I had to get three women and eight sons before I could walk about with the pride of a man who raises hens behind his compound. Each time I went out, I was happy because I knew I would come back and find you here. And as you grew I waited. I waited eagerly for the day when men would start marching in and out of my compound. Popular hunters, productive farmers, successors and princes – I waited for them! But now you have gone.' He paused for a while. 'Now you have gone. That means I will not even know that satisfaction which comes from chasing away silent cocks who think they can measure up to my hen. I was already dreaming of the techniques to use to chase away such cocks which cannot even crow!' His mouth twisted in a cynical smile, a short-lived smile. 'Now that you have gone, I have been reduced to a spectator. I will be forced to sit and watch the noisy cocks pass my compound to go to the next. No man is going to come here to ask for the hand of my daughter! No man is going to turn me into a father-in-law to a man!'

After another long pause, Temkeu let out a heavy sigh. 'I was a fool, a very big fool. I should have accepted the bride price offered to tie your hand when you were five years old. I should not have tried to play big. At least, I would have had something to show I fathered a girl, that a girl had lived in this compound.'

At the sound of fidgeting behind the closed door, Temkeu slowly closed his eyes. His time was up. He knew the next time he looked at the world would be the last time he saw his precious daughter. There was no rushing that final view. He captured in a good quantity of air, imprisoned it for a while and then let it out reluctantly, as a man forced to part with a treasured item. As the air escaped from his lung,

his chest sank, his heart shrunk. Beaten, he finally opened his eyes to acknowledge the victory of his invisible opponent.

‘Hey!’ he exclaimed. He swung his head towards the slab bearing the skulls of his ancestors and then back to the child’s body lying on his bed. The bewildered old man of a few moments ago had been replaced by a strong, active man, one with eyes fixed on the child’s body like a hungry man staring at a woman. He spread his lips as wide apart as possible. One word dropped out, two times: ‘Mefo! Mefo!’

Limbs almost came apart as people rushed into the hut. Mefo was not among them, but that did not stop Temkeu from rambling on about how the body, rather the child, had stirred.

The compound had again become a meeting spot. Those who could not find space inside the hut poked their heads through the window and door. The Fopou compound was renowned for making a public show of its problems. Several times those who had dared to talk peace had proposed that a village council be convoked so that Mefo and Temkeu exchange the peace plant, but several times the idea had died under suspicious circumstances – those who loved a spectacle knew where to get one.

‘Mefo, she is not dead,’ Temkeu again cried out.

‘Yes, *Mbeh*, we have heard you.’ It was a female voice but not Mefo’s. ‘You know that the only time a child belongs to one mother is when it is still in the womb.’ Achile Fopou, Temkeu’s first wife, edged closer to her husband and the bed. ‘It means that this child is also my own. My pain is as deep as the pain that you and Nkem carry. But please, *Mbeh*, also see reason. A child who died three hours ago cannot move. Just look at how stiff she is. I beg you, my husband, because if you do not wake up, our worry would be for you instead.’

‘Shut up, woman,’ Temkeu lashed out. ‘I know what my eyes saw. I saw this child move.’ As he spoke he tore away the burial cloth still covering the lower part of the child’s body. ‘If you had given me just one daughter then ...’ He hesitated and said instead, ‘Just stand here. I am sure she will move again soon. Stand here and you will see for yourself.’

The command intended for Achile Fopou transcended the

boundaries of marital authority. Silence fell on the hut as all eyes turned to the child's body, some daring her to move, others imploring the gods to do something, some just enjoying the free entertainment of a rare spectacle. The silence was still settling in when a loud shriek cut through with such intensity it distracted all but Temkeu. Towards the door, they all flocked. When their curious glances found Mefo lying on the ground, they briefly forgot about the child.

'You people come and see.' At the sound of Temkeu's declaration, the two men who had been helping Mefo to her feet let her drop like a leaf and swarmed into the hut with the others – the sight of a child come back to life was plainly more alluring than that of an unstable old woman. However, once in the hut they realised the child was immobile. The only person blinking and unblinking was Temkeu, not the child as he had asserted. Attempts to justify his claim only increased the hostility of the stares punching him. Even with the entire village against him, Temkeu did not back down 'Do not try to tell me I am building a house up in my head. With my two feet on the ground, I tell you that this child has life in her,' he reiterated.

'Yes, the tiger ate the man who took pity on it.' It was Mefo who had risen from the ground to walk tall. 'If you had died at her age I would have put you deep inside the earth without blinking.' Her face beamed with pride at being the only one capable of hammering square words into Temkeu's square head. But the satisfaction faded fast, replaced by anger at the humiliation in which he had soaked her. Dishing out commands like a man, Mefo ordered the child's body to be wrapped up and carried outside. 'You there –' she turned to a young man by the bed '– cut up the rest of the cloth into bands. I do not want to see any wrist without the white band in five minutes. That body should be covered with earth in five minutes!'

'Anyone who wants to see his teeth in his hands should be the first to come near this bed. Everybody should leave my hut. Now!'

The sympathizers-turned-spectators looked at Mefo and then at Temkeu. A few left but most simply rubbed their feet on the ground.

'Where is that cutlass?' As Temkeu dashed for the farming tool,

the villagers ran for their lives. Only Mefo remain unmoved. Just then Nkem dashed into the hut. Trembling, she requested that her husband deny or confirm what the grapevine had carried faster and further than the village crier had the initial news of the death.

‘Nkem,’ Temkeu said, ‘I married you many many years ago.’ He paused as if to allow the message to sink. ‘Today’ he continued ‘I tell you that this child has life in her. I tell you that she is not dead. I saw her with these my two eyes. She shook three times. Three times!’

Nkem opened her mouth but closed it without letting out a single word.

‘Follow your mother-in-law if you like, but I am the head of this compound, and I have made my decision. This child has life in her. I will stay with her until life fully takes control of her body.’

‘Maybe I should,’ Nkem ventured shyly. ‘Maybe I should go to the Mission and call Father?’ God can—’

‘Shut up, woman. The day you call that your God again inside my hut will be the day you carry your things back to your father’s compound. You hear me?’

‘Yes, *Mbeh*.’ Nkem sealed her surrender with a bow.

‘When you keep your head in the sky how can you know what is happening on the ground?’ Mefo sighed at her son and turned and ordered his speechless wife to meet her in the yard. There, she told Nkem to dispatch one message with news to the palace and another to fetch the diviner. ‘Even if the cock forgets to crow, we will still get out of bed.’

‘Mefo, I know you are a woman who bathes with wisdom,’ Nkem said. ‘But I have already lost my daughter; I do not want to lose my husband’s mind too.’

‘Speak like a person who has something to say.’

‘What I mean to say is that I am sure truth has a place in what my husband is saying.’

‘Get out of my sight, you stupid woman. I could not stand that man as a child. Now I understand why you can stand him as the head of your compound.’ Mefo turned to two young men and repeated the same commands in the same authoritative voice: ‘You, go fetch Tchafo. You, go straight to the palace and send a *nbinda* to inform

the *Fon* of the abomination living here.'

From inside the hut Temkeu whispered, 'Either you women talk like respectful children visiting a palace or you carry your noise with you elsewhere,' He was tiptoeing back to the bed when he stopped and rushed back to the window, shouting, 'Shout! Kill the deep sleep chaining my treasure to that bed. Call all the women in Mumba to come here and start shouting. Shout!' He walked back to the bamboo bed still repeating the word. Face to face with his daughter, he bid her to open her eyes. 'Wake up so that we prove to them that your father is the one talking sense in this place.'

Ten minutes later Temkeu was again shouting out claims to no one in particular. 'Believe me when I tell you that her heart moved like this—' Temkeu exhaled and inhaled, his hand rising and falling in rhythm with his throbbing chest.

Nkem, who was walking aimlessly around the compound, rushed in to catch her husband rambling about how the child had again stirred. 'Nkem, Nkem' Temkeu stressed, 'I tell you that this child moved.'

Nkem took one glance at the immobile child and then settled her raised brows on her husband.

'Am I the only normal person in this village? This child is alive! Do not move. Just stand here and soon you will see for yourself.'

Nkem remained glued to the spot. The minutes moved past. All was still but for the sound of their drumming hearts.

'Look, Nkem, you see that? Do not move your eyes from her heart. You see what I see? You see?'

'Hm,' Nkem mumbled.

'Yes, my daughter, make the effort. Take a deep one. Try!' Temkeu lifted his hand and wiped the child's brow. 'See! See! Did you see that?' He looked up at his wife to make sure she was watching the child but found her questioning eyes resting on him. 'I tell you to look at the child but you keep your eyes on me? You women are all the same. Get out of my sight. Go! And let me not catch you rejoicing when this child finally defeats death.'

Nkem wept.

Temkeu reassumed vigilance.

Mefo paced the yard, waiting for the arrival of elderly wisdom and the embodiment of the gods.

The cowry necklace as long as his neck to his stomach, the *ntamp cap* stuffing in his wisdom, the *ndop cloth* embroidered and sewn to the form of a long, overflowing garment – everyone usually gave way when such traditional regalia appeared on one person. To denote his rank, the Elder embellished his cap with a single sickle red feather.

When he stepped out of his sacred dwelling, men bowed and women stepped indoors. When he thundered his opinion, all others clung to the safety of their bearers' minds. He was the diviner, hardly ever without his raffia bag slung over his shoulder, never without the leopard spots of the gods dotted over his face and chest.

One dined with the *Fon* and the other anointed skulls and invoked spirits. The pair arrived at the Fopou compound with an inquisitive mob trailing them from a distance.

'Where is the head of this compound?' the Elder called out.

A baffled Temkeu stepped out into the yard towards the direction of the inquiring voice. As soon as his eyes met the red plume and the leopard stokes, he scuttled forward. Hand contact forbidden, he clapped three times and prostrated. 'Come good, elder of our land; come good, eye of the gods.' Pre-empting the question and apologising all the while, Temkeu dove into a narration of how the child was just some minutes away from full consciousness.

'Where is the body?' Without waiting for an answer, the Elder and his silent companion stomped into Temkeu's hut. Temkeu hesitated at the door. The village crammed into every nook and cranny in the Fopou homestead.

'There is just one child here,' the diviner said after examining the body, 'and she dwells with the living. I can feel her heartbeat. Did anyone check for a heartbeat after Temkeu started claiming the child was alive?'

'No!' Temkeu exclaimed. 'No. It was easier for them to conclude that I was crazy.'

‘You people have all heard,’ the Elder declared after a few moments ‘that the child is alive.’

The Elder had proclaimed that Fatti Fopou was alive. Fatti Fopou was alive. Had the family indeed succeeded in stealing back from the night what it had stolen from them? Perhaps the night had not stolen her after all. Perhaps it had just taken her for a short visit to the place. Perhaps she had escaped from its grip and somehow managed to find her way back. Or perhaps the night had taken pity on the family and decided to shed some light on their faces. Perhaps. Perhaps. Perhaps. The fact was that Fatti Fopou was alive! Those at the window exclaimed it to those further out. Those in the yard shouted it to those in neighbouring compounds. So the news travelled to the village, with bits and pieces added and subtracted along the way.

Back in the hut Temkeu, who had sprinted inside at the Elder’s confirmation, lowered himself onto the hay mattress. He enfolded Fatti’s feeble hand in his. ‘Fatti, it is your father.’ He shook the words into the child, who had again closed her eyes to the world. ‘Fatti. Fatti.’ He nudged her but she was as immobile as she had been all morning.

The diviner shoved Temkeu aside, bent over Fatti and ran his hands over her body. Temkeu tapped his feet. In a matter of seconds, his status had changed from dreamer to victor. The Elder’s declaration had proved to the village that he was not insane. Yet, if Fatti did not keep cooperating, if she did not stay alive, then everyone knew what was going to follow: someone was voluntarily going to compose a song which the children were eagerly going to adopt, singing after him wherever he went. ‘This child should not do this to me. The shame will be too much,’ Temkeu whispered to himself. ‘I refuse to imagine that I may lose my victory before I have had time to gain more respect and win influential friends through it. I refuse to imagine that I would lose a second chance of being a father-in-law, and why not to an important man.’

Only one thing could give Temkeu the fame he desired and only one thing could help him keep his head up: the Elders decision. Was he going to give the child more time or was he going to order her

seemingly lifeless body to be buried?

‘I do not plan to send this child back to the land of the ancestors,’ the Elder stated after the diviner’s words to his ears about the child’s health. ‘I will not send back a child who decides to stay with us. But let us remember that if she chose to go in the first place, it was because she did not like it here in the land of the living. Let us not forget that he who tries the patience of the ancestors calls the anger of the gods.’

This remark was greeted with chilling silence. Everyone was waiting for what was still to follow. Looking directly at Temkeu the Elder declared, ‘Thirty minutes. If the ancestors want to convey a message to us through this incident, I am sure they will do it in the next thirty minutes. If she has not fully returned by then, we will bury her.’

‘Thirty minutes,’ Temkeu said under his breath. ‘Thirty minutes.’ As if to take his mind off the child and the drama surrounding her, he took to attending to his august guests. ‘Bring a stool for our Elder,’ he said but then leaped to a corner of his hut from where he pulled out a special wooden stool carved in repeated patterns of a spider, the symbol of wisdom. ‘Bring some palm wine too.’

While the Elder accepted the cow horn transformed into a drinking vessel, Temkeu’s best, the diviner plunged his hand into his raffia bag and brought it back with a similar horn. Stooping in front of his guests, a gourd of palm wine in his hands, Temkeu filled both horns. The Elder lifted it to his mouth, wrapped his lips around it and gulped. He nodded several times.

As they drank and waited, Temkeu swerved the conversation to the activities to follow. Once a hole had been dug with the intention of feeding it with a body, it could not be refilled without the promised meal. His voice louder than permitted, he singled out the self-declared corpse bearer to dig out a plantain stalk and bury it as a symbolic gift to the crater. Temkeu continued preaching until it hit him that he had spoken too fast on two accounts: his daughter had not been officially welcomed among the living and he was no longer head of a compound but host to an Elder and a diviner. What saved him from any repercussion was his daughter.

‘Water,’ a feeble voice said. ‘I want water,’ Fatti moaned from the bed.

‘Bring water. Fatti wants water.’ Gourds changed hands and soon the diviner stood over Fatti, supporting her head and urging her to drink.

Outside, the decision had been made: Fatti had returned and returned to stay.

‘No more *cry die*. Let us celebrate life,’ one of the women intoned.

‘No more *cry die*,’ the crowd repeated the incantation, obviously happy for a child sent back to life and happier that instead of gathering in the evening to eat in remembrance of the ‘ancestrally departed’, they would be communing to celebrate life.

‘Let us thank the ancestors for the gift of life,’ the woman again intoned and the women, joined by others on the way back from their farms, transformed the compound into a festive ground as they clapped and gyrated in a circle around the mango tree in the middle of the compound. They danced to the admiration of the men, who had just snuffed out life from a goat – compensation to the ancestors for Fatti’s life – and were chopping off and cleaning out the head, feet and entrails. In a couple of hours, their palms would all be stained with palm oil as the meat was shared around.

At that moment the compound had two faces. While those outside were thinking, talking and acting in the light, those inside Temkeu’s hut were still battling with the night. It had shown its face again. However, its coming out in the daylight could either brighten the light or deepen the imminent darkness. Fatti had regained full consciousness and recounted what she remembered of the past three hours. Her statement was simple: her great-grandfather had sent her back to life with a message for Saha Tpune.

An ancestor had sent the child back from the land of the ancestors after three hours. Those in the hut did not try to understand how that could be possible. Humans did not understand the power or actions of the gods. An ancestor had sent the child to Saha Tpune. Who was Saha Tpune? That was the preoccupation of the men.

‘I do not know of any person in the Fopou clan with that name,’

Temkeu declared.

‘For my part,’ Tchafo said ‘I was born here and grew up here.’ He rubbed his chin. ‘I have lived in this village all my life. I know the names of almost all children in all compounds in Mumba quarter, and I know almost every family in the entire Nchumuluh village.’ Tchafo stressed. ‘But this man, who is he? Where is he from?’ Tchafo, even with his umbilical cord tied to the gods, could not put a face to the name. ‘Are you sure you do not know him, Temkeu? Your father never mentioned any man by that name?’

‘Saha T’pune. Saha T’pune’ Temkeu repeated the names. ‘Saha T’pune. Wait, I think I remember something.’ The Elder and diviner tilted towards him. ‘It seems my father had a friend who often visited from neighbouring Kombou village. I was a small boy and so I cannot remember much, but I remember a name like Saha.’

‘You are right. Saha is a Kombou name,’ Tchafo stated.

‘So that should be it.’ The decision maker had been quiet for too long. ‘I will inform the *Fon* and first thing tomorrow morning, some *nchindas* will be wiping the dew off the grass on the way to Kombou.’

‘See, I told you people.’ Typical of his profession Tchafo boasted. ‘I see far, very far. I saw it and I told you that the man could not be of this village. By the way, Temkeu, I hope you have not forgotten that you need to give thanks to your ancestors for sending the child back to life.’ As he spoke, his eyes roamed over the skulls on Temkeu’s slab. ‘I will be waiting for the hen and palm oil to perform the sacrifices. I—’

Temkeu cut off Tchafo’s words and smile with a little piece of news: ‘That man, Saha T’pune, died before I was old enough to run after a goat.’

The Elder shook his head and voiced his concern: ‘What can a man who died when you, Temkeu, were still a child have in common with a child like Fatti? Again, why would your grandfather send Fatti from the land of the ancestors to deliver a message to someone who dwells with him in that land? Does it mean that your grandfather has sent the child to a dead man? Hm! If we do not put out the fire consuming one house, the whole village might become part of the fire.’

All three turned and stared at Fatti, elegant in her mother's best loincloth. Her eyes closed, her breath soft, she seemed so peaceful.

Like a flame fighting against the wind, Fatti had fought against death and triumphed. Her flame was now burning brightly. She had become the star of the village. Everyone wanted to talk to her. Everyone wanted to hear her story. Everyone wanted a firsthand account of what had transpired during those three hours when she had been lost to them. The *Fon* and his entourage had heard her story. Her family and friends had heard her story. The village had heard her story and in a unified voice had declared that Fatti had come back to life after a brief visit to the land of the ancestors.

There was someone who lived in the village but who was not of the village. He had heard what the village said about Fatti's experience but he did not share their views. That did not surprise anyone; in fact, it would have surprised them had he nodded with them. However, he had not yet voiced his opinion on the matter. He had not broached the issue with Nkem though he saw her almost daily. All that was attributed to him was through inference – the village simply did not expect him to believe what they believed. Two weeks after the events of that infamous morning, they were finally going to have him confirm their opinion – he had invited Nkem and Fatti to his home for a discussion.

That afternoon Fatti Ashi stepped out of her grandmother's hut en route to the Catholic Mission. Ashi! That was a name she endeavoured to keep on her tongue as a way of keeping it in her head. Mefo had given her the name after her return to life. She had said Ashi meant 'gift of the gods.' That was what the village said: that the gods' decision to switch her back on was a gift to her family.

As she walked from her father's compound, Fatti took the bend that separated it from Angu Matamo's estate. Angu Matamo was not just a close neighbour. He was her father's best friend and the father of her close friend Susannah. He was also her worst enemy. Whenever she heard his voice, she made sure to disappear before he appeared. She could not say what it was about him that made her

look in the opposite direction: his deep eyes and inquisitive stares or his compulsive manner; his stout hands or their desire to touch and own whatever they wanted. All she was certain of was that he repulsed her.

Though Fatti did not like the man, she loved the fruits he grew. As she walked by Angu's property, she stepped under the canopy of mango trees and emerged with some windfalls. She bit into one of the mangoes and was about to take another hungry bite when she noticed that some juice had landed on her dress. She frowned. The knee-length flowery dress hanging over her plump frame remained her favourite. How could she resist loving a dress that had travelled the privileged journey from Yaoundé, where her stepbrother Makam resided, that had arrived inside his travelling bag and landed in her open hands as a gift? The answer was even more obvious since the dress had come to add only to two others. After two years of continuous wearing and washing, the colour of the once-black collar was now only visible enough to perfectly reflect her complexion: dark but faded. Beneath the patchy glaze of palm oil, her skin appeared clearly parched. Her rough palms provided testimony to the life of an only girl in a family of thirteen. The dried blisters and wide cuts on her soles gave an estimate of the number of kilometres she covered day after day, from the stream to the farm, from the market to a neighbouring quarter or village. Yet her wide and innocent eyes never seemed to lose their gaiety. Unlike her drained body, they were a true reflection of the soul of a nine-year-old.

After about thirty minutes of walking, Fatti arrived at the Catholic Church, the only symbol of Christianity in Nchumuluh. St. John Bosco Parish Nchumuluh was under the Diocese of Buea, the first in the territories, erected in 1950. The large, square building roofed with corrugated metal sheets was an imposing structure in a village of small, circular thatched huts. The white stones and cement blocks used to raise the walls also stood a world apart from the earth bricks of which the huts of the natives were built. The church was a place where the people were still learning to feel at home.

Fatti stepped inside the church, genuflected, crossed herself, 'In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit,' and

stepped out. At the presbytery, she caught up with her mother who was waiting for her. Together they walked towards the parish office, and extension of the presbytery, for the appointment with the parish priest Reverend Father Maxworth Cain, known better as Fr. Max, a missionary from Ireland.

‘Nkem,’ Fr. Max said from behind the wooden desk, the most prominent piece of furniture in his office. Fatti and her mother were sitting on a bench across the table. ‘Nkem,’ he repeated, ‘Thank you for coming to see me. You know that I wanted to come to your compound but the head of your compound refused to hear anything of it.’

‘Do not worry, Father. That is how he is.’ Nkem did not feel as comfortable as she would in her compound but neither did she feel as though in the presence of a stranger. When Fr. Max had first come to the village about a year back, it was unheard of for him to have an open dialogue with a villager. It was even rarer to have a woman discussing with the white priest in the absence of a tribesman. Now Fr. Max was not simply the person who stood on the altar to say the daily Masses Nkem attended; he was also the one who sat next to her in the confessional.

‘Nkem,’ Fr. Max said after a few seconds of contemplation, ‘you have received baptism and that means you believe that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came and died to wash away our sins. Is there wisdom in my words? Do you agree with what I have said?’

‘Yes, Father, I agree because that is what the catechist taught us during doctrine.’ Nkem kept her head to the ground as she spoke. He was not her husband but he was a man, one who had authority over her.

Fr. Max raised his eyes from Nkem’s figure to stare at the stony wall above the two heads. ‘Fatti –’ he lowered his gaze to her face ‘– do you believe in Jesus Christ, in God who has answers to all problems? He inched forward, smiling.

Fatti looked him in the eye but offered not a word.

Fr. Max returned his attention to Nkem. ‘I know that we have not been in your village for a very long time and that many people still do not understand our teaching. Do you tell Fatti about Jesus?’

Does she believe in Jesus Christ?’

‘Father,’ Nkem said stiffly, ‘Fatti has not been baptized.’

‘Yes, but you bring her with you for Mass sometimes. She knows about Jesus Christ,’ he stated firmly and then continued very quickly, ‘As followers of Christ we need to always trust in God. We should trust Him at all times and praise Him in all situations for He is our sovereign Lord. He is the Creator of heaven and earth. He created you and me and all people and the animals and all the nice things that we have here on earth. He is the only true God who sent His child to come and live with us and die for our sins. We should not offer animal sacrifices since Jesus already offered His life for us. Jesus died and resurrected after three days. Fatti could not have died and resurrected as the whole village claims. She was probably just asleep or maybe in a coma. She—’

Fr. Max’s nervous rattling ended as the catechist unexpectedly stepped into the office. ‘Father, sorry for interrupting but I have an important message for you.’

The two men discussed for a few minutes.

‘I have heard what you have said, Father —’ Nkem said once the catechist walked out ‘— and I accept that your words have wisdom.’ She moved forward in her seat and raised her head slightly. It was as though she had been waiting for this moment from the time she got the invitation. ‘Your words have much wisdom, Father. But you know that our ancestors lived long before you came with your God. The fact is that Fatti’s great-grandfather, who has gone ahead, sent her back from the land of the ancestors.’ With those words, Nkem put a full stop to the conversation. Her face was blank.

Fr. Max bade them goodbye, his countenance a clear expression of his disappointment.

Fatti, who understood little of what had transpired between the two adults, was simply happy to be out again in the open country. ‘Mama, can I walk around. I have not gone out of the compound for two weeks.’

‘Yes, you can go for a walk, but you have to be home before dark. You know your father does not like it when you stay out in the dark, especially as you have not completely regained your health.’

After reassuring her mother that she was going to return home early enough, Fatti wandered off into greenery. Masses of earth heaped into mounds, the hills rose one above the other with valleys twirling in-between as though following the course of a winding river. The hills were always green. Even in the dry season, when drops of water seeping into the earth were rare and the sun high and hot, green leaves and crops still dominated the scenery. Plantains, bananas, pears, tomatoes, paw-paws, mangoes, guavas – they often were so innocently green it appeared they had sworn fidelity to the colour. While some of Fatti's brothers ploughed the fertile soils of Kombou in the French Cameroon, others ran after cows on ranches in Santa village in British Southern Cameroons. Still others stayed home in the boundary village of Nchumuluh, where the two neighbouring territories had spilled part of their herds and fertility.

After walking for a few minutes, Fatti found a seat on a cool spot under the shade of a plum tree on the comb of a hill. Over treetops and rooftops, her eyes drifted through the valley and settled on one particular area: her father's homestead. So much had changed in her life since that eventful day. The farm and stream had become out of bounds to her. The boys now washed her clothes and they washed the pans and pots. They did a good job at washing the pots, revealing the aluminium beneath the soot better than she had ever done. She loved to hang around the pots washed by her stepbrother Totso, for they gave a vague reflection of her.

Since that day, she no longer brought food to the men; they served her. Her other stepbrother Tamu always made sure that she ate to her satisfaction. Mosa, her younger brother, took his concern to the point of providing her with her favourite fruits daily. He was ready to run up and down a guava tree for her at any moment. Mefo was the best of all. She cooked pounded potatoes and beans for her and served her more than one slice of meat. Fatti had even moved out of her mother's hut and now slept permanently with Mefo. Though she missed her mother, she loved Mefo's cotton mattress and was in no rush to return to her mother's hay bed.

Fatti could not help but agree that her return from the land of the ancestors had exposed a side of life she never thought possible in her

father's lifetime. But what about Saha T'pune? Why had Mefo's father sent her with a coded message to a dead man? Why had he picked her? What did a dead man want with her?

The questions were still plaguing her mind when sleep crept in and took control over her body. She dreamed she was playing hide and seek with a dead man.

What was intended to be a nap ended up as more than an hour of sound sleep. When she stirred it was to realise that the sun had started losing control over the sky. She quivered.

'Fatti, oh. Fatti, oh,' someone was hailing.

'Ouuuuuuuuu!' She threw back into the air as she struggled to her feet and hurriedly dusted the grass from her dress. 'Ouuuuuuuuu! I am on the way, oh.'

She scampered down the hill, ignoring the adults she passed on the way and ignoring her favourite guava fruits offered by one of her friends. She only slowed when her soles acknowledged the slight elevation of earth at the entrance to their compound. Totso was waiting for her. His advice was grim: 'Go to Papa's hut before he comes for you.'

Without uttering a word, Fatti walked through the yard towards their father's hut. The door was ajar. She could hear voices coming from inside. She crawled in to find that Mefo and her father were engaged in their favourite past time of hurling invectives at each other. If they noticed her presence, they did not make it obvious. Fatti wished she could escape unseen; after all, she would have reported to see him. Yet she dare not look at the door. Once a child had shared the same space with adults, their permission was the first key to open any door. That meant she could not walk out and neither could she walk into the quarrelling pair. She had been scared to face her father, but as she looked at him and Mefo swinging fingers in each other's faces like two delinquent children, she became restless. She was simply eager to get the matter settled and to get out. To make the waiting bearable, she decided to close her eyes. But just then all went still. The crackling fire, only seconds ago muffled by heavy voices, now sounded like a trumpet in the heart of night. As though fearing what she might see but having no choice but to look,

Fatti slowly opened her eyes.

When her gaze merged with her father's, she knew that her liberty was over. Something in his eyes told her that all the leisure was over. She wanted to look away but she could not. She was no longer looking at her father but at herself in his eyes. The reflection she saw was not that of the girl she was but the one she used to be, the girl with twelve brothers: the one who swept the compound while the boys swept their classrooms; the one who bent over the grinding stone three times for three mothers in three huts, everyday; the one who walked long distances with short messages; the one who went to bed weak as a girl but woke up strong as a boy.

'Do you have holes in your ears? When I push a word so it comes out through my mouth, I expect that you do the same,' her father was yelling at her.

'Has night come, Papa?' Fatti said, unsure of what she had missed.

'Did that long journey to the other world take away some of your senses? How can you come in front of adults and close your eyes? Do not tell me that you are still sick. If you are strong enough to be walking about at this hour, then you are strong enough to go to the farm. No more lying about pretending to be sick. As from tomorrow you go back to all your duties.'

'Yes, Papa.'

'A child cannot wake up in the morning and become an adult,' Mefo intervened.

'Has night come, Mefo?' Fatti greeted.

'Was the day good, my child?' Without waiting for an answer Mefo continued, 'Let us go to my hut. I have something for you.'

Temkeu's yells about how Mefo was teaching Fatti a bad example by shielding her from reproach even in the face of misconduct rebounded into his ears. Fatti and Mefo had walked past his door.

Fatti looked forward to one last nice night before adopting her old life. Did Mefo really have something for her or had she said so only to get her out of her father's hut. If someone were to ask her what she wanted from Mefo on a last evening of freedom, she would have asked her to complete the story of why she never got married.

Too many times Mefo has started the story, the last being only the previous evening, but too many times something or someone had prevented Mefo from completing it.

When they arrived at Mefo's hut, one of the five in the compound, the first thing Fatti did was to light the bush lamp. After bringing the fireside to life with glowing flames, she placed a pot of water on it. As she waited for the water intended for bathing to get warm, she started washing the cocoyams for the evening meal.

Finally, the two women sat warming themselves by the fire. They had taken their daily baths and were waiting for the food to get ready. Mefo asked, 'We are in which year?'

'1959'

'I do not want to hear anything about the white man.' Mefo sighed. 'That white man has brought nothing but division. We used to have the annual dance at the end of each year. The village used to come out as one to rejoice and offer thanksgiving sacrifices to our ancestors. The white man came and had to put his own big feast at the same time as our own. Then he said those who choose to follow him should not come to the village dance because we do evil things there. Do not mention that white man near me.' She paused and asked again, 'In which year are we?'

'We are in the year after the Church came to our land.'

'Are you not still talking about the white man?'

'Sorry, Mefo. The year ... the year ...'

'Beauty used to have a home in me,' Mefo said slowly.

Fatti smiled. That was the typical start of the story she wanted to hear.

'Beauty was mine in the days when my breasts were hard like unripe pears and my skin smooth like the back of a calabash.' The wrinkles around Mefo's eyes formed thicker folds as they bore the effect of the smile that shaped on her lips. Most of her face was twisted, layers of tradition trapped in the folds. 'My beauty was a fact.' As she spoke, she pushed the firewood deeper into the fire to fuel the dying flame. She then dove into a narration about the years when she shone as intensely as the flame. 'With each step I took, more and more eyes followed me.' The small penetrating eyes, the

pointed nose, the heart-shaped lips – these features transferred to a trimmer and firmer body would indeed produce a sight worth pursuing.

‘You are still beautiful, Mefo,’ Fatti confirmed and then bent beneath the pot of cocoyams to fan the smouldering coals. She had to blow several times to reawaken the flames.

Mefo watched on, inhaling and exhaling tobacco-scented air from her pipe. From beauty queen to Queen Mother, she continued the narrative of her glorious days. ‘I am sure you know that the beauty living in you comes from me and not from that stupid man the gods punished you with for a father.’ This brought a turn in the story. It was now about Mefo’s father. A period of prolonged silence soon followed.

Fatti looked about the hut lazily. The upper layers of the wall had lost their original earth colour and were now painted black with several coats of soot and so were the layers of bamboo shelves at one corner of the hut. She glanced at Mefo. Her gaze was still fixed on the glowing flames. Just as she started drumming her fingers on her lap, Mefo shook her head several times and then lifted the cover of the hot pot with her bare fingers.

Fatti flinched. A woman’s palms were always going to be as hard as wood. If a woman was not rocking a mortar pestle, she was rocking a hoe handle. Mefo had proved that a woman’s palms were not only going to be as hard as wood but also as metal. A woman opened hot pots with her unprotected hands. A woman’s palms were destined to be as hard as the grinding stone.

‘When I was your age,’ Mefo said, bringing Fatti back to the present, ‘a man came to ask if he could take me to his compound so I stay there and pound *achu* for him; yes, that was just after I started pounding *achu*.’ Mefo paused as she again drifted into her thoughts. ‘But that marriage was not for me,’ she eventually continued. ‘I hated the idea to the point that I offered my body to illness each time they set a date for the traditional marriage. After it failed three times, the man threw his manhood.’

‘What does it mean to throw his manhood?’ Fatti asked.

‘My child, you will soon become a woman, and to take your place

in society, you need to understand the language of the people. A man, as the head of a compound, has to always stand by any word which comes out of his mouth. Once he has decided to marry a woman, he has to remain true to his words until the gods invite one of them to the land of the ancestors. He does not have to return to change his words, especially if he has already offered kola nuts to a woman's father.'_

'So the man came back to take the kola nuts which he had given to your father?'

'My father got very angry, but I did not care because I knew I was beautiful and was going to have many other men.' Mefo put down her pipe for the first time that evening. 'The day the gods decided that I was to become a Mefo,' she said sadly 'was the day my life changed. A Mefo can marry but my father had always said that a Mefo from his compound will never marry.'

'But Mama said that Mefo was a special title for special people?'

'Yes, my child, that is why I want you to be my successor. I want to make you a Mefo. I ...'

The sudden rapping at the door caused her to swallow the rest of her words.

'Has night come, Mefo?'

'Welcome. Come inside.'

'I was on the way back to my compound and said I should just stop and greet you. I cannot come inside since the children are waiting for me.'

'The man who has looked into the house and seen the inside must enter. Fatti, get up and give way for Suum's mother. Also bring my headache medicine.'

Twisting her face, she did as Mefo had requested and then retired to the bed at the corner of the hut. She may have to wait another month or year to get to the true end of that story.

Nchumuluh was a small village. Mumba was an even smaller quarter in the village, a quiet place where people worried mostly about the welfare of their families and community.

It was a place where the people all spoke one language and with one voice. However, the arrival of the Church had changed all that. The people no longer walked as one but went about in factions. While one group worshipped at the Catholic Church, others carried out their religious activities in Tchafo's shrine. Temkeu was among the latter. He often visited the shrine either to consult the gods or to offer sacrifices in supplication or thanksgiving. It was a Tuesday morning. He was off to the shrine to seek the wisdom of the gods. His step was heavy step, as though the burden on his mind had transferred its weight to his feet. To arrive and handover his burden – that was what gave him the strength to keep moving.

He had been walking for sometime. Tchafo's shrine was only a few meters away. He could make out the outline through the branches of the trees that flanked the footpath. However, just before he came within full sight of the shrine, Tchafo called out from inside, 'Temkeu, go back to your compound.'

Temkeu suspended his step in midair. He credited the diviner to have foreknowledge of his arrival but as to asking him to return, he was not prepared to give in without a fight. Lips curved in a fury, he dared, 'What do you mean, Tchafo?'

'I mean that you should go back to your compound!'

Temkeu took several steps forward. 'How can you ask me to go back when you have not even heard what I came to tell you?' he asked boldly. 'How can you ask me to carry my problem back to my compound?' At the mouth of the shrine, he took off his *ntamp* cap, folded it under his armpit, took a deep breath and stepped inside.

'Temkeu,' Tchafo said without lifting his head from the bowls into which he was extracting juice from crushed leaves, 'I have told you to go back.'

'Go back to where?' Temkeu asked defiantly. 'If I cannot get

comfort and answers here, where am I going to get them? This is the place where the wisdom of the gods dwell. How can you send me away from the shrine? This shrine is big enough to carry all our problems.'

The shrine! The walls of palm fronds woven between bamboo pillars, the feathers of rainbow colours planted into the fronds, the animal skins sprawled across the earth floor, the raffia bag from which dangled dry snake skins and monkey tails, the gourds and clay pots of various sizes filled with concoctions of leaves, barks and roots of almost every plant species around, the skulls displayed at the four angles of the rectangular structure – such was Tchafo's shrine. Such was the place where he performed the divine duties of invocation, purification, protection, solicitation, libation and every act related to the gods that had 'tion' as suffix.

'Temkeu,' Tchafo repeated, 'The gods have nothing to tell you today except that you should go back to your compound. Your compound is shaking with trouble.'

'But I am just coming from my compound' Temkeu barged in. 'It was very well when I left. There was no trouble around it.'

'I tell you now that trouble has visited it. Go, Temkeu. You know that the rain has no pity for the man who decides not to cut a leaf to protect himself. I tell you that you should leave my shrine and go back to your compound.'

Temkeu looked over his shoulders at the door. That was as far as his effort went.

'If you really take me for the eye of the gods, then go back to your compound now.'

Temkeu made as if to keep arguing but then marched out of the shrine. He was used to dishing out orders, not receiving them. He was accustomed to talking down to women. He usually had the last word, even with Mefo. What was Tchafo trying to prove? He swung around and started walking right back. At the entrance he removed his cap, stomped inside, folded his hands over his chest and waited.

Tchafo did not lift an eye in his direction. He went about his business as though in the company of one of his spirit visitors.

'Why did the ancestors send Fatti back with a message for a dead

man?’ Temkeu finally spat out. ‘Why did the ancestors send my child to a dead man? And what is the message which she carries for Saha Tpune?’

‘If you believe in the gods’ Tchafo said, ‘then do what they tell you. The answers you seek will come to you when the time is right. Go, Temkeu. Thunder is striking in your compound.’

This time Temkeu walked out and did not return. The seriousness of Tchafo’s tone had finally sent home the message that something was amiss in his compound. He had strolled to the shrine; he was almost running back to his compound. His body was dripping, beads of sweat trapped in the hairs that had invaded his chest. Despite the searing sun, he marched on, his soles beating the earth.

What good did it do to run ahead of the future? If Tchafo had not told him that trouble was wrecking havoc in his compound, he would have lived the present according to plans of the past. He would have enjoyed the present while poising to tackle whatever lay ahead, but only when it became the present. Here he was breathing like a horse as he rushed to address trouble. What kind of trouble could it be even?

He accidentally hit his left foot against a rock and squealed, ‘I kicked my bad foot? Trouble is really following me. But what kind of trouble?’ Could it be Fatti’s health, or the boys or one of the women? Or maybe it could be Mefo. ‘Disaster strong enough to remove Mefo from my life!’ he muttered. ‘Do I really want to intervene? Do I want to arrive early enough to prevent it from doing its job?’ The stride slowly became a lumber and then nothing. After a few moments, he sighed in resignation. ‘When a man bites his tongue, he cannot spit out all the blood. He must swallow some.’

Mefo remained in his thoughts as he continued the journey home. If only she would acknowledge that the gods are always men, never women! If only she would accept that the eyes of the gods are always men, that *Fons* are always men, that elders are always men, that *nchindas* are always men. ‘She may be older,’ Temkeu blurted out, ‘but I am the man. She may be a Mefo, but I am the head of a compound. People will talk of Mefo’s hut but never Mefo’s compound!’

As if in defiance of his words on the subordinate role of women, a woman's squeal greeted him as he came in view of his compound. Temkeu dashed forward, following the sound until he stood face to face with the source. Nkem. She was clinging to the mango tree in the middle of the compound as though eager to be one with it. Temkeu just stood and watched as she released the mango tree and transferred her aggression to the earth, tormenting it with her buttock's back and forth movements. Asking her to keep her hands still would have been tantamount to preventing her from discharging her pain, for the more she wailed, the more active her hands became – carrying her jaws, holding her waist, tapping her laps – they just seemed unable to remain still. Her headscarf which had been attacked by her roving hands lay under the tree not far from where she sat. Such a display could have been the climax of a traditional dance but it was the expression of a woman's distress. 'Come and help me! Oh, people of Mumba, come!'

And they had come – the nearest neighbours, family, friends, onlookers. Inhabitants of Mumba quarter had taken their usual place around Temkeu's stage of a compound – the cry of a woman in distress was as good as the village crier's gong. The villagers had still not gotten over Fatti's unprecedented return from the land of the ancestor. They talked about it on the farm, the market, the stream, the road, at funerals and death celebrations and in their huts at night. They had again converged in the Fopou compound, and they did not just talk about Fatti, but also about Nkem, the white man's faithful disciple. Was her agony linked to the white man who had brought his God to compete with theirs?

'People of Mumba come and help me!' Nkem again cried out from the ground.

Temkeu did not step forward to help his wife. He took one last glance at her and asked, 'Where is Fatti?' He rushed from one hut to the other, starting with Achile's and ending in Nkem's from where he pulled out his daughter. 'Are you okay?' He stooped to her height and began a rapid physical examination of her body, stretching bones here and flexing joints there. Satisfied, he stretched out and looked about. Nkem was still rocking on the ground. She seemed even more

disconsolate.

Mefo was conspicuously absent. Temkeu started hurrying towards her hut but then changed direction and moved towards the five women trying to console Nkem. 'Come good, my mother-in-law. What trouble is worrying your child? Why is she crying like a child?'

Tangue Pualine gave a thunderous clap, folded her arms above her breasts and clumped her lips. 'hm!'

'Hm, what?' Temkeu barked. 'Speak woman.'

'Trouble oh! The gods have spoken.'

'The gods?' Temkeu shuddered.

'Yes, the gods have spoken, and they have not spoken for us.'

'Tell me, what did they say? When?'

'You know Samboa, our diviner far away in Nchusa village, the—

,

'Yes, yes, I know him. What?'

'I went to see him to ask him to look into the future and tell me if my harvest would be good. You know that problems have been following me these past years —' At the intense look in Temkeu's face, she returned to the story. 'Yes, I went to see him to ask if my harvest would be good. Hm! The kind of thing that he told me made me to start running from Nchusa right to Mumba. Hm!'

'Hm what? Talk! What did he tell you?'

'He told me about my grandchild whom the gods sent back to life. He said that death might again steal her soon. He said that ...'

Temkeu turned around, fished Fatti out, grasped her wrist and pulled her all the way back to Tchafo's shrine. Thrusting her forward and watching as she rubbed her sore wrist, he voiced his desire: 'I do not know what the gods want from this child, but all I ask is that you protect her. Keep her in this world.'

'A one-year-old spotless white duck,' Tchafo, who was sitting with his legs folded in, said without looking up. It seemed he had not moved from where Temkeu had last seen him. 'What I need to appease the gods and call on their protection is a one-year-old spotless white duck.'

When Temkeu returned an hour later with the token, Tchafo pulled Fatti forward and asked her to revert to her birth attire. One

clothing-piece over her head and nudity appeared. Tchafo took his place in front of her. Using a blade dug out from one of his many clay pots, he branded her chaste skin with three small lacerations on the outer parts of her wrists, her elbows, the sides of her ribs, the back of her neck, the split of her buttocks, the outer sides of her knees and her ankles. Then, while chanting an incantation, he massaged some black herbal mélange into the cuts. Fatti's flinching and slight groans went unnoticed as he continued to send the mélange home with all his force. As if to justify the application of pressure, he explained that the medicine had to merge with her blood in order to form the scars which were to protect her from any evil spirits on her trail.

'You shall not bathe for three days.' That was the only effort Fatti had to contribute towards the success of the operation. 'Take this and swallow.' Tchafo handed her a bowl of gloop. 'It tastes like Aloe Vera and earwax combined, but it is accurate like the predictions of the gods and efficient like Tchafo.'

'Since you are not to bathe for three days –' Temkeu said to Fatti on their way home '– you can stay away from the farm for three days.'

'Thank you, Papa.'

As soon as he walked into his hut, Temkeu approached his skulls, words of supplication tumbling from his mouth: 'This matter now lies in your hands. I have done what is in my power to appease the gods to act in my favour. I count on you to do the rest. You know that I need this child here with me in the land of the living – that is why you sent her back to me. Please do not take her again before ... before ... Please just give me more time with her.'

That night Temkeu retired over a jug of palm wine and later on Achile's body. The night was not so good for Nkem who got out of bed with the puffy eyes of one who had not seen sleep at all. It had taken a brawl for Mefo to allow Fatti to spend the night with her. Standing by the bed, she looked down at Fatti lying on the hay mattress. The cuts on Fatti's bare torso looked up at her. She sighed and walked outside.

Just as the bells alerting Christians that they had thirty more

minutes before the start of 6 00 a.m Mass rang, Nkem rushed back into her hut and to the bed. 'Fatti, wake up. Fatti.' She shook the child out of slumber. 'Wake up, Fatti.'

'Mama?'

'Yes, wake up and let us go for Mass.'

Rubbing her eyes and scratching her stomach, Fatti got up and aimed for the door, but before she had taken two steps, she tripped over a gourd and kicked the mortar.

'Come, I will help you. Where is your chewing stick?'

Five minutes later, as they wiped off the dew from the grass with their bare feet, Fatti asked, 'Is something happening in church, Mama?'

'I just want Father to pray for you.'

'Okay, Mama.'

The fierce cold made them billow steam with each word. It turned their skins to a bed of taut goose pimples and increased the hardness of the calluses on their soles and palms. Nevertheless, they hurried on, letting nothing prevent them from catching up with the appointment with God. They left behind women with *cainjas* strapped on their backs and young men strolling lazily, chewing sticks sticking out of their mouth. Aside from the whistling of the cold wind, the air also bore the sound of dry corn grains bouncing against the iron walls of a corn mill and that of exploding gunpowder. When the distinct cry of the *juju* gong commanding all women to opt for blindness met up with them, they immediately halted, turned their heads to the bush and waited until the sound of the *juju*, which was returning from or heading to a burial or death celebration, faded in the distance.

Almost thirty minutes after they set out, Nkem and Fatti finally arrived at the church door and crossed the boundary into serenity. Though the church had existed only for about a year, Nkem and a handful of other women, like Suum's mother, had made it the most regular place they visited, second only to their farms – and it was only after daily morning Mass that many of these new converts set out with hoes and *cainjas*. Such swift attachment to so alien a culture had not gone unnoticed by other villagers. Of the many rumours circulating on their account, the most prominent was that the white

man had charmed them. But how? Some villagers had taken it upon themselves to dig out the truth. They had returned from spy missions to the white man's haven with the theory that the charm was put in the wafer: 'The white man eats a large piece, prepared differently, but gives our people very small slices.'

Even before the village had time to digest the charm theory, others had moved on to analyse the wafer-size evidence: 'Our people, in other parts of the country, labour hard in the fields to grow the wheat and produce the flour. Our women, in the convents, prepare the bread. The white man comes and all he does is say a few words over it; yet he eats the greater share!'

The more they speculated, the more theories they devised. At the end of the day, the white man was not only considered as a lazy glutton but also an egoist who drank alone while the natives ate and swallowed saliva.

As time passed, the villagers' concerns had moved from the rapid adhesion of the women to the priest's lifestyle: 'We need at least three women before we feel there is a piece of manhood in us. But look at this man who survives without even a quarter of a woman? He is not normal!' A few words but repeated over and over by many mouths.

The Christians did not give in without a fight, 'Our priest, our man of God, is a special man. God did not use a woman's rib to make him. God used his own rib. So a woman kills our priest like salt kills an earthworm.' Even these many words from Fr. Maxworth Cain's few supporters did not prevent the sceptics from growing in number and propagating their theory further. Everyone in the quarter knew the songs that had been composed to describe him.

What inspired Nkem and the other adherents to follow the new faith? Was it some deficiencies of their own traditional religion or simply adventure? Was it curiosity over the white man and all he represented or surrender to a force too powerful to be ignored? Though Nkem and the other Christians so far had been unable to give satisfactory answers to these questions posed by their contemporaries, the doubts remained in their compounds and in the quarters. In church the priest had no equal.

After Mass, Nkem took Fatti to Fr. Max. 'Pray that God should

protect her, Father.'

While chanting an incantation, Fr. Max sprinkled holy water on Fatti and used his chrism-greased thumb to cross her forehead. 'Pray the rosary with her everyday and bring her to Mass as often as you can,' he said to Nkem, 'and get her baptised.'

'Her father is the problem,' Nkem retorted.

'Fatti, do you have a rosary?'

'No, Father.'

They collected the rosary from the presbytery and got to the compound in time to catch Temkeu's last words to his skulls: '... protect Fatti so that she stays here on earth. There is still much she has to achieve. Let her not come and go without a history big enough to be passed down.'

Temkeu got out of bed with a word to his skulls and went to bed with a word to his skulls. The last visit he made each night was to Mefo's hut and the first in the morning was still to Mefo's hut. He did not want to hear from another that Fatti had woken in the same state in which she had gone to bed. He had to verify for himself that her breath had not been snatched away during the night. Like everyone in the compound, Temkeu agreed that one good had at least been born from the crisis: For the first time in a very long time, Mefo's and his thoughts had moved in the same direction. They had unanimously agreed that Mefo was in a better position to do the right thing should the ancestors try to take Fatti during the night. That was how Fatti, for the second time, had left her mother's hut for Mefo's.

Soon the three days of rest were over. Fatti returned to accompanying her mother to the farm. When she got back home in the evening, she made for Mefo's hut where she spent the night. As she continued to live with the days and weeks, Temkeu's attention gradually shifted to another aspect of her life. Each morning, as she walked past his hut on her way to the farm, his eyes did a tour of her anatomy.

'Why is her chest is still flat? Where are the signs of womanhood?' In need of answers to the questions he asked himself, he called her to his hut one evening. 'How many branches have you cut from your age tree?'

‘Nine, Papa.’

In the continuous absence of the sight his eyes were on the lookout for, the news that she had added one year from the time he last inquired was good enough to merit celebration over palm wine and corn beer with his friends. Fatti was getting riper and the time was drawing nearer.

February sailed along gracefully with life for the Fopous being as normal as it could be. Day after day, the boys ran after knowledge or cattle, while the women bent over farms, deracinate shrubs and stumps, gathering and burning, and then tilling and waiting. By mid month each nose full carried the scent of dust stirred out of slumber by the first rains, heralds of the approaching season. March came along with the beginning of the rainy season. The Fopou women, along with others in the village, returned to their farms, this time planting and weeding.

Life for Temkeu Fopou was also as normal as it could be. A typical morning for him started with a heavy meal, which digested as he took the short walk to his pottery and carpentry workshop, where he spent most of the day. Before returning home in the evening, he often stopped in the village square to make some noise and share some palm wine or corn beer with his friends. He was making for the village square, one evening, when it suddenly started raining. He rushed into a nearby compound but not fast enough to avoid the first few drops of rain, which ran down his torso to be trapped in the folds of his loincloth. He sighed and sighed. His problem was neither his wet skin, which will dry in a few seconds, nor his wet loincloth, which will dry in a few minutes. Superstition held that anyone who was soaked by the first rain would be caught in the rain throughout that rainy season.

By August, the flurry of raindrops had become the most faithful companion wherever anyone went. September stepped in with the start of another school year. After primary education, which was all Temkeu could offer his sons, the first two had moved to Yaoundé, the capital of the French Cameroons, with promises of getting more education and returning home to sow its benefits. Five years had gone by since he had last heard from the second. Though Makam, the first, rarely made the one-day journey home, material evidence and remittances showed he carried his family in his thoughts. Achum,

Temkeu's fourth son, had decided to try his hand at trade by moving to Douala, the economic city. The twenty-seven-year-old gave Temkeu reason to walk about with raised shoulders. Apart from his frequent trips home, he was changing the face of the compound with the brick house he was building nearby. The pampering lavished on Temkeu by his daughter-in-law also added to Achum's list of achievements.

Whenever Temkeu talked about Makam and Achum, his tongue rolled with the ease of one comfortable with a subject. When the discussion stirred towards the likes of his third son, Bacham, his tongue grew heavy with shame. A failed trip to acquire employment in banana and tea plantations in the coastal region, drunkenness and women – these were all he had to show for his twenty-nine years on earth. To increase the weight of Temkeu's shame, his three middle sons had taken Bacham's example a step further. Everything they did said they were just waiting for him to close his eyes so that they start competing with his wives for his property. As concerns the five youngest sons who still lived under their mothers' roofs, Temkeu let go no opportunity to make it known that he had only one favourite. Though just eight years old, Mosa showed signs of conquering where his other brothers had failed. Unlike the other young boys, Mosa went to the farm every day, either accompanying his grandmother, mother, two stepmothers or at times his sister, Fatti. In the evening, he moved from one hut to the other doing whatever there was to do – fetching water, gathering wood, lighting the fire. His was the first name that dropped from every mouth in need.

It was the first day of the school year, and the day had dawned with a huge smile carved on Temkeu's mouth. He walked out of his hut wearing one of his pair of *jumpers*, his raffia bag and the pair of leather slippers which Makam had brought for him – Makam had shown up unexpectedly the previous evening. By 7.00 a.m., Temkeu was walking out of his compound, dragging along a new Mosa clad in the Catholic school uniform – a sky blue shirt and a pair of khaki shorts. 'I am sending you to school today,' he said to Mosa as they walked down the road, 'because I want you to grow up and be like Makam. Have you heard?'

‘Yes, Papa.’

‘You take the white man’s book seriously and you become like Makam!’

‘Yes, Papa, I have heard.’ On this bright Monday morning, Mosa had two exercise books clutched in his armpit and a sharpened pencil trapped in his fist. His friends ran out of nearby compounds and hailed him. It was easy to tell they would have loved to be the ones wearing the Catholic School (CS) Nchumuluh uniform and heading for the school premises.

Temkeu and Mosa walked on without talking for a while, except greeting and acknowledging greetings from passers-by. As they neared the school Temkeu said, ‘The white man has done a good thing by opening a school at my nose. Last year it took only a short walk to register Totso, and I am doing it again with you. I remember the days when I used to walk right to Santa to register your elder brothers in the Council School.’ He paused in reflection. ‘Yes, if not for the white man, you would have followed the school to live in Santa with relatives who sing welcome songs but sigh the moment I turn my back.’

The duo covered the thirty-minute walk from their compound through the village square to the mission premises and were now standing in the administrative office of CS Nchumuluh. After a few casual words with the Headmaster, Temkeu dipped his hand into his raffia bag, brought out the fee of one pound three pence and was about to hand it over when the office owner asked Mosa to step forward. The headmaster, popularly known as Teacher Alfred but fondly called HM by his colleagues, was one of the few educated indigenes of Nchumuluh. He was a secondary school dropout from Saint Joseph’s College, Sasse, in Buea.

‘Mosa,’ Teacher Alfred called out, ‘you think you are ready for school?’ He squinted as if to scare the boy.

‘Yes, *Sar*,’ Mosa replied, failing in his attempt to sound brave.

Teacher Alfred got up from his seat behind the small wooden desk. His bulk rose to occupy two meters of air space. When he took one step forward, Mosa took two steps backward. ‘If you fear me, a mere man,’ Teacher Alfred said, ‘what will you do with the alphabet

which you have never before set eyes on?’

Mosa was speechless. He could not take his eyes off the headmaster.

Teacher Alfred moved closer, flaunting his muscular torso clad in a blue shirt partially covered by a black velour coat so tight his biceps barked with each swing of his arm. The red pair of trousers went only as far as his mid shin while his feet were covered in a pair of washed-out blue socks and tucked into a pair of white sandals. ‘I hate to have to beat knowledge into pupils, you know.’ As he spoke, he tapped a yellow, wooden ruler on the palm of his right hand. ‘School is not made for every person. Do you agree with me, Mosa?’ His thick lips formed a queer smile.

Unable to open his mouth Mosa simply nodded.

‘Come here, Mosa.’

Temkeu urged the reluctant child forward.

‘Take up your right hand.’

Mosa’s eyes flitted left and right but his hands did not move.

‘History has shown that pupils who require me to repeat myself are those who go on to repeat classes.’ Teacher Alfred grinned. ‘I will repeat my request only because this is your first day here; but I hope it does not happen again, that is, if at all you would have the privilege of talking with me again.’ He took a deliberate pause, cleared his throat and said, ‘I repeat: Take up your right hand, Mosa.’

Mosa started lifting his left hand but before it was midway above his head, he brought it down and lifted the right, then the left, as though he were learning how to move his arms for a march. He again took up his right hand and was about to put it down when his father answered his silent plea for assistance. ‘That is your right hand. So leave it up.’

Teacher Alfred, who had been staring at Mosa with amusement said, ‘Now, place it over your head towards the direction of your left ear.’

Mosa did.

One eyeful and Teacher Alfred declared, ‘He will have to come back next year.’

‘But he touched his ear,’ Temkeu objected.

'I am the judge here. I am the one representing the white man, and I say that this child is not yet ripe for school.'

Temkeu was about to fuel the fight that was brewing when Fr. Max strolled into the office, casually dressed in a short-sleeve white shirt and knee-length khaki trouser. Both men immediately dropped the fingers they pointing in each other's faces. Teacher Alfred took off his twine cap, greeted the priest, turned towards his desk and started fumbling with some sheets of paper; Temkeu tapped the *ntamp cap* on his head and folded his arms over his chest.

'Has day come, Pa Fopou?'

'Yes, Mr. Father.'

'I see the head of the compound has decided to bring another child to school. What is your name?' Fr. Max asked the prospective pupil.

'Mosa Fopou,' Temkeu answered.

'Mosa, how old are you?'

Temkeu seized one of the exercise books from Mosa's hand, pulled out a piece of paper and stepped forward with the determination of one eager to prove a point. He held the paper in front of his eyes as though to read out the answer, but all he succeeded in doing was turning the paper several times in different directions.

'Let me help you,' Fr. Max offered, taking the piece of paper with little effort. 'A birth certificate and the name is actually Mozart'

'Mosa,' Temkeu corrected.

'The name is Mozart but since the villagers have difficulties pronouncing the Z sound, the name has been transformed to Mosa. But you are correct, Father, –' Teacher Alfred smiled '– the name is Mozart.'

'Well, Mosa, I hope that one day you will be a famous person,' Fr. Max joked. 'Do you know the person after whom you carry this name?'

'My uncle gave him that name after a German who lived here before people from your country ever came. The German went back to his country after it lost that first big war.'

'Now that we are here,' Fr. Max said with a smile, 'I hope you will

name some children after us.'

'You mean you the British and the French who now rule over us?'

'You have plenty of sense, Pa Fopou. Let me just finish here with Mosa and we will go to my office to add more time to that talk.' As he spoke, he ran his eyes over the birth certificate. 'Eight years old! Why did you not bring him to school last year?'

'I brought him this year because I, Pa Fopou, need to have another son in school. I am sure you know my Totso. He is in class three. I removed him from the Council School in Santa to bring him here to your school. I am a real man in this Mumba!' Temkeu nodded. 'Yes, only a man like me who knows the taste of sweat can have two children in school. Only a man who carries the future in his head can send five out of twelve sons to school. And you know what?' he tapped his foot, 'This is not the end of my story because some of my boys are still too young to try their luck with the paper and pen.'

'Well done, Pa Fopou. You are a real man, and I am happy that you decided to bring Mosa to school. Anyway, how do you people say it again? If the wind does not blow ...'

'If the wind does not blow, no man will see the anus of a fowl.' Temkeu completed, eyeing Fr. Max askance. 'You have learnt a little but you still have a long way to go. And do not even try to think that you can learn all our culture.'

Fr. Max smiled. 'Let us allow Teacher Alfred to register Mosa since he is already late. Come and let us go to my office, Pa Fopou?'

'No, Mr. Father, I have to go to my workshop now.'

'I know that your time is very special, Pa Fopou, but I want us to talk about your children registered here ...' Fr. Max hesitated and then quickly added 'and your other children. I will not take much of your time.'

Temkeu reluctantly, Fr. Max eagerly, both men walked out into the schoolyard of CS Nchumuluh. One rectangular block of earth bricks plastered with cement and roofed with metal sheets— that was the school. The block was divided into five classrooms. Four teachers bore the responsibility of imparting knowledge to the pupils spread

across classes one to eight, most of whom were former pupils or dropouts from other schools in neighbouring villages. Unlike the other classes, only the pupils of classes seven and eight had the privilege of having a teacher and room to themselves. Not only were the pupils of class eight the most educated of the school, but they were also its torch – the better their performance at the Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination, the brighter the school colours shone. The examination was also the first and last public examination three-quarters of the class of four was likely to ever take.

That morning the pupils had assembled and were chewing their tongues, dropping out undecipherable sounds as they sang to the unadorned tricolour – green, red, yellow – flag dangling on the flagstaff at the entrance to the school compound. It was a country with one flag, two people with two languages from two colonial masters, the French and the British. In fact, on the 1st of January that very year, 1960, French Cameroons had gained independence from the French to become The Republic of Cameroon. British Southern Cameroons was still a United Kingdom trustee territory. Situated on the border between the North West Province in British Southern Cameroons and the West Province in The Republic of Cameroon, the inhabitants of Nchumuluh were torn between two languages and two cultures: English and French and the *Graffi* and *Bamileke* cultures respectively. Officially, they were part of British Southern Cameroons.

As the British National anthem died down, the pupils listened to announcements while waiting for the bell. Though it spoke only one language, it gave out different messages at different times of the day. At 7.30 in the morning, the voice of the bell commanded the less than sixty pupils to march to their classrooms. Bare feet for the most part, sky blue dresses and shirts hanging on their bodies, one or two exercise books clasped in their armpits, finger-length broken pens and pencil stumps clutched in their hands, the future of Nchumuluh headed after knowledge.

‘Good morning, children,’ Fr. Max acknowledging greetings from some pupils and then turned to Temkeu: ‘How is your girl doing?’

‘Ah, you mean my Fatti? She is doing fine.’ Temkeu gave a wide,

brown smile. 'I have many children but Fatti is my only daughter. She has gone to the farm with her mother.'

'Why did you not bring her to school?'

'School? For her to do what here? I already have Totso and Mosa in school. And again if I send my only daughter to school, whom I am going to send to marriage?'

'Nobody says a woman who goes to school is not fit for marriage.'

'Nobody will marry a woman who has gone to school to have big sense!' Temkeu stated. 'I have only one daughter and she will go to marriage. All that she needs to learn before marriage, she will learn at home and on the farm, not in any school.'

'God will give you other daughters if you pray and if He judges that you really need them.'

'Hm, that your God! You turn left – God. You go right – God. A child is sick – God. Harvest is bad – God. You do not think He gets tired?'

Fr. Max smiled. 'He is an Almighty God who is everywhere at the same time and hears the prayers of all people at the same time. He is with you in your workshop and with me in my office and with your wives on their farms, listening to all of us. But you say we ask our God too much? What about your gods? I am sure you also ask many things from them.'

'I have not gone to your school but we have plurals even in my vernacular. So you yourself have answered your question. Our "gods" are many. It means we can ask them whatever we want any time. They join their heads and their powers to look into our problems. My son from Yaoundé always says something like: "Many heads join together to make the work easy."'

'Many heads do light work.'

'Yes, something like that,' Temkeu said with a wave of the hand. 'But even if our gods give me twelve daughters, I will not send any of them to school.'

Fr. Max started saying something but Temkeu did not let him finish.

‘You see that young and strong man coming this way?’ Temkeu asked, pointing towards the road. ‘That is my son, the one I was just talking about. I sent him to school and he followed school right to Yaoundé. Now he is in the army. He knocked on my door yesterday night.’

Short-sleeve shirt tucked into matching army khaki trousers, the trousers in turn tucked into military boots, a white bowler dancing on his head – everything about Makam said he was an indigene only in blood. He looked and sounded like one from another culture. ‘Good morning, Father. Papa, I came to check if all was going well with Mosa’s registration.’

‘Everything went well, Makam.’ Temkeu’s pride shone on his smile.

‘Good morning, Makam. Your father was just talking about you.’

‘Oh, yes, my daddy is a very hard working man who went via a lot of hard work to establish me in the world. I am very happy seeing him again after years of absolute separation; yes, I am happy being here among my people whom I greatly missed. Well, let us put aside the customs of rural dwellings and expand upon this unintended encounter. May I be *opportuned* to be granted temporal possession of your nomenclature?’ Makam smiled at Fr. Max.

‘I am Fr. Max, parish priest here.’ His voice was subtle, his gaze baffled.

‘Yes, that much I know,’ Makam carried on. ‘What I want is more lip action from you. I want to know which part of the galaxy hosted your body and soul before you landed on this patriotic soil of ours.’

Fr. Max looked lost.

‘Apparently, you seem to have problems deciphering my humble intercession. Allow me to assist you with a verbal illustration: I am Makam Fopou, corporal in the Republic of Cameroon army. You have educated knowledge of the Cameroon army, do you?’

Fr. Max apparently had an invisible muzzle over his mouth.

Temkeu just kept nodding.

Makam took advantage of the silence: ‘So how are your activities within your domain of definition? I hope everything is going on smoothly without any entropy. Oh, my ears have just grasped

penetration of my former friend's voice down the road. Let me give velocity control over my body and leave you two to continue gallivanting your tongues. Gaining your acquaintance brought me much gratification.'

Makam walked away.

Fr. Maxworth nodded after him.

Temkeu's smile stretched.

'Is Makam your first son?' Fr. Maxworth asked.

'What?'

'I asked if Makam is your first son?'

'Yes, my first born from all my women. Achile, my number one wife, is his mother.'

'I see. How old is Fatti?'

'Fatti? By this time next year, she would have cut eleven branches from her age tree – that tree which we named after her when she came into this world. Every time she adds one year, we go to her tree and cut off one branch. This leaves a wound on the tree stem. This way we will never forget or argue over her age.'

'So she is ten years old now. But why can you not make a birth certificate for her?'

'What is she going to do with it when her life starts in her mother's hut and ends in a man's compound? We make birth certificates only for boys.'

'So you say that school is not good for Fatti? You say that she died and resurrected?'

'Look, Mr. Father, I came here to put my son in school. If you do not want him, tell me and I will take him back with me to my compound.' Temkeu lifted his finger to the priest's face. 'My wife told me a long time ago that you were saying things to her that Fatti did not die. Our gods sent Fatti back from the land of the ancestors, and you come to tell me that Fatti did not die? Look, Mr. Father, I came here to put my son in school and not to talk about my family. If you do not want my son in your school tell me and I will take him back to Santa.'

'No, Pa Fopou I ...' Fr. Max started but never finished.

Temkeu walked on right into his compound without having

looked back once. His wives, some of the boys, Fatti and a few neighbours formed the crowd gathered under the mango tree in the middle of his compound.

‘Neighbours in my compound again? What is the problem this time? And why is Fatti not on the farm? What are her mothers still doing in the compound?’ The questions gushed out of his mouth. He took a few agitated steps towards the crowd and found Makam at the hub of the activity. Bread here, matches there, dress here, milk there, sugar here, exercise books there, Makam was dishing out manna from his shop of a polyester carrier bag.

The women showered him with good wishes to supplement their ‘thank you’: ‘Makam, may your shadow never grow less; may the gods fill that bag which you have emptied into our hands; may...’

‘So that is what it is all about! If only every crowd gathered in my compound could be made up of such cheerful faces. But where is Mefo?’

That night the crowd carried its cheerful face into Mefo’s hut for a rare evening at the Fopou compound. In the presence of one father, one grandmother, three mothers, some children and grandchildren, the Fopou family bonded like it had not in a long time. Some on stools others on the bed, their strewn figures painted overlying silhouettes on the walls of Mefo’s lit hut. The family formed two groups: those who opened their mouths and those who opened their ears – Mefo and the men against the mothers and children. Contrary to expectation, Temkeu kept his lips glued and his eyes on Fatti. Makam thus became the main orator, his travels supplementing his manhood. Between mouthfuls of roasted corn, he talked about life in a military uniform, about round tubes which had the light of the sun in them and made the night shine like day and about cars which moved on water. The audience laughed and taunted and disagreed. Reliving fond memories and creating new ones to sustain them in times of separation – that is what the Fopou family was doing.

When the pot of fresh groundnuts came down from the fire, the humans became rats. Cracking and chewing, swallowing and reaching for more, they ate as though their stomachs had been deprived of

food for days. The children were the only ones who ate like people accustomed to eating groundnuts, and the reason was simple: Mefo had declared that their last swallow was to coincide with their departure to bed. Unlike most days, when they retired by 8.00 p.m. to be up and running by 6.00 a.m., the adults chatted on unconscious of the passage of time. It was only when Makam switched on his pocket radio to catch up on the ten o'clock news that they realised they had drifted further into the night than intended. The looks on the faces of the three Fopou wives said, 'We wished we could remain seated'. But mindful of the duties that awaited them at dawn, they got up, relit their lamps – which they had put out to save kerosene – and walked past the door. They parted with their husband's name on their lips, one praising the fact that he had for once allowed others to speak, another condemning his failure to share useful experiences with his children, still another claiming that all his attention had been on Fatti. All three turned to stare at Fatti who was carrying one of the little children to his mother's hut.

When the rest of the group finally left, Fatti picked up the broom to gather the groundnut shells strewn all about. After two strokes, she immediately dropped the broom but not fast enough to have escaped Mefo's vigilant eyes.

She pulled out her pipe from her mouth and yelled, 'How many times will I tell you not to sweep at night? Do you want to wake up devils? I have told you many times that the night is time for devils. If you hear your name at night when you do not know who is calling, do not answer because it is the devil. If you want to talk to someone, go near the person. Do not shout out any person's name at night because the devil will hear and come and repeat it. Have you heard?'

'Yes, Mefo.' Fatti could not sweep but she could glean groundnuts on the floor and give her teeth the satisfaction of the action denied her hands.

Morning came and with it the departure of the august guest. But when Makam took off for Yaoundé, he left something behind, something which Fatti discovered and which she hid under Mefo's mattress.

Temkeu shoved the blanket from his body, jumped out of bed and fastened his loincloth. Yawning and stretching, inching and groping, he unlatched the door and flung it open.

Outside, he traced the familiar path to the back of his hut. Standing with his face to the bush, he emptied his bladder of the overnight load. He walked to a cypress tree and brutally attacked a small branch, not letting go of it until it let go of its hold on the stem. After peeling off the bark, he thrust the branch into his mouth and attacked it with his kola nut-stained teeth. He was walking back to his hut when he ran into Nkem on her way from the latrine located out of eyeshot and earshot from the compound.

‘Has day come, *Mbeh*?’

‘Did you sleep well?’

‘Yes, *Mbeh*,’ she answered and then added ‘You are up very early. It seems you want to go out. Should I heat up the *fufu* corn and *njama njama* so that you eat before you go?’

‘You know that it is too early for me to eat. I will go and come back before I push down the morning spittle.’

‘As you say, *Mbeh*.’ She hesitated and then added, ‘Since you may return when I have already gone to the farm, I will tell Fatti to stay back and give you food before she joins me.’

‘I am going far and will surely return very late in the afternoon or early in the evening; so do not worry about food for me.’ He was walking away when he turned and asked, ‘You did not go to greet your white man God this morning?’ He chuckled. ‘Has He travelled? Or maybe you are angry that He has kept Fatti out of your bed for so long. Maybe He is the one who is angry because you go to bed with His name and get up with His name, blaming Him for everything bad, even that which comes from the evil spirits.’ Temkeu laughed as he made for his hut. ‘I warned you people about that white man and his God but you refused to listen to me.’

Back indoors he examined the items of clothing hanging from

nails on a lath stuck to the wall and selected one of his pairs of *jumpers*. In front of his slab, he picked up a comb, passed its teeth through his greying hairs and then covered them with a black twine cap. Finally, he put on Achum's gift of a leather watch, though it no longer ticked with the passage of time. Before stepping out, he stopped in front of his skulls. 'Keeper of our people, right hands of our gods –' Temkeu stared hard at the two skulls '– I offer you the mission of this morning. Bless my feet so that I hit no bad stone on the road and put the right words into my mouth. I beg you today that you reveal to me that which will bring peace back into my heart.'

Temkeu closed the door behind him and set out. He did not need to lock the door. Though access into his hut was open to anyone, respect kept everyone out, even a stranger who came by when the compound was devoid of human presence. The doors of the women's huts remained ajar throughout the day. They did not just leave the door wide-open but displayed food for any hungry passer-by. These could be men, women or children on the way to or from their farms. All a hungry person needed to do for food was arrive at the nearest compound. The only price was that they keep in mind the next hungry passer-by. It was always easy to tell which hut belonged to the head of the compound: that with the closed door.

After many hours of trekking, Temkeu finally sat opposite Samboa, the diviner in Nchusa village. 'The last person to bring dust into my shrine yesterday was your son. You are the first to wake up the dust today. What would we do without sons to announce us?' Samboa said.

'Yes, our sons are our feet when we are young and our walking sticks when we grow old.' Temkeu answered and then cleared his throat. 'So tell me, eye of the gods, what have your powerful eyes seen about Saha Tpone, that man to whom my Fatti was sent? I have carried these past two years with much anguish. You are the eye of the gods, and you should know that I had visited Tchafo on this same issue. I invited patience into my bed, just as Tchafo had told me to do, but patience got tired and it has now run away. I know that this matter has already been buried in the minds of many in my compound and beyond, but not so for me... not so for me.' He

paused for a while. 'Look at my forehead. The furrows are now as many as those on my wives' farms. I am the head of a large family. I get up every morning and go to work. I do not sleep until I know that my family is sleeping – yes, our fathers did not teach us to sit and wait. That is why I am here. I am sure that you will see something which remained hidden to Tchafo. I am sure that the gods are going to use you to bring peace back into my life.'

The sound of cowries being ruffled on Samboa's palms was subtle compared with human voices. Silence soon took over as Samboa concentrated on reading the message of the cowries he had thrown on the floor. Temkeu watched and waited.

'I see a young man,' Samboa said abruptly. His eyes were now fixed inside one of his many clay pots. 'You said that you knew Saha T'pune when he was a child?'

'When I was a child, Saha T'pune was already an adult. He was one of my father's friends.'

'I see a young man,' Samboa repeated and then cried out, 'Ah, what is happening? The image is disappearing!' After many attempts at wiping his eyes and returning them to the pot, he looked up at Temkeu, shaking his head. 'It just disappeared in front of my eyes. I do not know what happened, but all I can tell you is that it disappeared.'

'But look again. I am sure you will see something. Send your eyes right inside the pot and look again.'

'I have told you that it has already gone. It has disappeared!'

Temkeu had not moved from the spot where he sat. He folded his arm over his chest, sighed and looked at the ground. He lifted his head and toyed with his chin. He got up and edged towards Samboa's clay pot. 'Let me help you to look. I am sure I will see something. Since this matter concerns me, I am sure the gods will use my eyes where yours have failed.'

'Sit down, Temkeu. I know that you worry about your child,' Samboa said with concern. 'What I can tell you is that I think you need to wait. What has just happened is a sign that the gods want you to wait. Come back when some time has passed, and I will try again to see if the gods can reveal more to me.'

‘You mean that I should go back as empty as I came?’

‘The gods sent man to earth with a cock in his hand and a hoe on his shoulder. “Eat the fowl when you are hungry. Spill its blood as tears to us when one of you dies. Live with it in your compound, for it will help you not to forget your cutlass or harmer.” Just go back to your compound, listen to your cock, and make use of your harmer. Do your part and the gods will do their own.’

Temkeu arrived at his compound to find his son Achum, who had been home for a three-day visit, preparing to take off. ‘Papa, I was just waiting for you. Do not tell me that you still put on that old watch which surely no longer works. I will bring you another one next time.’

‘Come, my son, let us go inside.’

Inside his hut, Temkeu took a gourd and half-filled it with water. He stood above his skulls, uttered some words, sipped from the gourd and then handed it to Achum: ‘Drink, my child. May our ancestor go with you and watch over you.’

Achum accepted the gourd with both hands, drank and handed it back to his father. ‘Thank you, Papa.’

Staring blankly at the mud wall, Temkeu said, ‘I have had no news of Makam since he went to Nigeria to add the amount of knowledge in his head. Have you heard from him? You know that you are the only one who gives us news about Makam.’

‘Since he left I too have not heard from him. I sent him a letter through the post and I am waiting for his reply. I will inform you as soon as I have any information.’

Once Achum walked through the door, Temkeu returned to his skulls, this time with a question: ‘Why has Fatti’s life become a riddle which no one can solve?’

When Achum finally left for Douala, thirty minutes later, more of Temkeu’s peace of mind left with him. He ignored his hammer and his chisel and locked himself in his compound for three days – the duration of Achum’s short visit but a very long time for one with Temkeu’s will and principles.

Saturday arrived, a special Saturday since it was a Country Sunday, the day set aside for the gods to bless the land for a good

harvest. Farm work was consequently forbidden on such a day. Anyone caught farming paid a heavy fine. Again, popular myth held that injury sustained on the farm on a Country Sunday never healed. Rest from the farm gave the villagers time to trade and relax. The Country Sunday was also the weekly market day, one which rotated on a weekly basis.

The arrival of the Country Sunday was what succeeded in returning to Temkeu some of his former zeal for life. Given that it was a Saturday, some of his children had accompanied their mothers to sell their produce while others had gone out to play. The elderly men of Mumba quarter could be found only in one place: under the palm tree in the village square. Even with his eyes, closed Temkeu could trace the track from his compound to The People's Club, as Pouafo Fatamba, one of the club members, had named it. The planks that had been nailed around the four corners of the palm tree, as makeshift seats, would have been hard even for someone with surplus hips; however, they served their purpose. So did the female trader's maimed table chair which had prostheses of two earth bricks in place of its missing legs. Apart from being a drinking spot where men chatted over corn beer and palm wine, the site had also gained a reputation for hosting championships of backgammon or *mejang* as it was known locally. Some with freshly tapped palm wine, others preferring that with increased alcoholic content because of overnight fermentation, the spectators often sipped as they watched the two contestants.

Temkeu sat down, commanded a bottle of corn beer and joined in the discussion. When someone mentioned kola nuts, he picked up his raffia bag and started rummaging inside: a chisel, a hammer, a measuring tape, a black twine cap, snuff tied in dry tobacco leaves and some kola nuts. Releasing the five nuts from the nylon wrapping, he handed them to Paufo Fatamba, who said some prayers for protection and in turn handed them to another club member, who segmented them and walked around from member to member, his palms serving as a plate. Each person took one lobe. Amidst the noise and laughter as they encouraged and taunted the two competitors, Temkeu kept his eyes fixed on the palm-size receiver

speaking at the corner. It belonged to Pouafo Fatamba, an ex-military officer and another of the educated few in the village. He was notorious for reading any piece of paper the wind threw at him, whether a fading three-year-old newspaper clipping used as salt wrapping or a loose scrawly page from a child's exercise book. His appetite for information was just so voracious that no piece of inked paper escaped his inquisitive eyes. It was not surprising then that he was the one who kept his friends informed on happenings around the territories and world.

'Any news for us today, Pouafo?' Temkeu asked.

'I am full only of old news,' Pouafo answered. 'But is there any subject in particular on which you want information?'

Yes, Temkeu was eager for information about his son Makam but he knew that Pouafo could not satisfy him. 'No,' he said, 'I do not want news about any particular situation, but you know that my ears are always open for news about our people and also our African brothers in neighbouring countries.'

'Temkeu, would you like to play the next round?' someone asked.

'What else can a man do at The People's Club on a Country Sunday? Help the women to sell vegetables?' A gale of laughter broke out as Temkeu moved to take his place in front of the game board, a new one. Superstition held that the first time a newly carved board was used, good luck was to knock on the door of one or several of the contestants.

'Yes Temkeu, play,' someone said. 'Maybe that good luck which this board brings is meant for you. We have been playing since afternoon but are still waiting for good news to meet us.'

'How could you think good luck would recognise you when my hands have not touched the board? I am Temkeu and when Temkeu is present things happen. Let the game begin!'

After several rounds of playing by the rule of elimination, Temkeu sat face to face with Angu Matamo.

'If we sit facing each other now, it is because we are the masters of this game, Angu said. 'We have crushed all who came to try our might. Let us now show them how to play real *mejang*.'

Moving the horn away from his mouth Temken replied, 'This is

the part that makes my blood become red. I will do anything just to add some colour to the game.'

'One cock each,' Angu proposed. 'The winner takes the two.'

'I prefer women – I mean hens.'

'As long as it walks on two legs but is not a man.'

The deal set, the game went underway with Angu picking up the seeds used as dice. As they played he bragged, 'I have told you not to argue with one who knows more than you, Temkeu. I will show you that I started playing this game when your father's father had not even picked out your mother for his son.'

'You can argue with your mouth, Angu. I will argue with my hands on the board.'

Fifteen minutes later, Angu had more reason to hit his chest. 'Temkeu, I have told you that a duck will never grow teeth. See, I have just added a hen to my poultry simply by moving a few seeds around a board.'

'It is luck which helped you to win, not big sense,' Temkeu defended.

'I prefer to argue with my hands on the board, not with my mouth. Let us play again, and I will show you that luck did not even come near me – you know that luck does not smile two times with the same person at the same place on the same day.'

'Stop the talking and show us the action,' one of the spectators intervened. 'Show him that he is just throwing empty words, Temkeu. Play the game to show him that you are the master.'

'I came here to play and I will play and even show Angu that I started playing this game long before he ever saw a *mejang* board.' As Temkeu yielded to the baiting, the spectators exploded into a round of applause.

Angu had not yet given his last word: 'I will defend my title, yes, but on one condition.'

'Talk it, shout it, sing it, Angu. I will do anything to show you that I was born with a *mejang* seed in my hand.'

'Anything I say?'

'Yes, anything. Anything ...' Temkeu hesitated.

'Are you changing your words, Temkeu?' Pouafo said. 'Is fear

taking control of you? You are the one who has to show us that you are a man. So you have to accept Angu's condition.'

'Okay, let us hear your condition, Angu.'

'Hm, let me see ... what if I ask for the hand of your daughter?'

'What?' Temkeu exclaimed. 'I am not sure I heard well. Somebody should tell me that Angu did not just ask me to give him the hand of my daughter over a *mejang* board.'

'You heard well, Temkeu, and if you want to hear again, I will repeat it. You said I could ask for anything in return for playing another game with you. So I ask for the hand of your daughter.'

'Land of our ancestors! So he is serious! He is talking about my only daughter, my treasure! My answer is No! No! No!' Temkeu took a deep breath, looked straight at Angu and then asked, 'Tell me, did you have this idea in your head ever since?'

'Whether I had it in my head or not one day she will have to marry; and if that day is today, then you will start enjoying today.'

The onlookers, who at first had seemed shocked at Angu's proposal, now nodded in agreement. 'Yes, think about it, Temkeu. Fatti is still young – that means you are still a long way from owning the respect of a father-in-law. But if you are wise enough to exploit this opportunity which the ancestors have put at your door, you may climb that ladder very soon, even today, even in some minutes.'

Temkeu quickly got over the initial shock. He looked from Angu to the crowd and back to Angu. Could seeds of a marriage planted under a palm tree by the roadside ever grow? And if those gathered around were really his friends, would they urge him to plant where he may never reap. When his gaze merged with Angu's, he remembered the promise the former had made to him at Fatti's first funeral: 'If it means that we hack our way through, we will uncover that road which leads to a compound of fertile women, and we will pluck another ripe fruit for you. You will have another daughter, Temkeu. I will not sleep until it happens.' How could the very Angu who had promised to help him find the mother of his second daughter now try to steal his only daughter even in the presence of so many witnesses?

'Temkeu, you know that tomorrow is pregnant and nobody knows what it will bring forth' someone was saying. 'Who knows?'

Fatti may even die again, and the ancestors would surely not be so kind to send her back to life a second time. They cannot allow her to make history two times on such an important issue. She shocked us when she came back from the land of the ancestors the first time. It cannot happen again! Therefore, you should act with wisdom and use this opportunity which the gods have sent to you. I am not saying that I want your daughter to die, but tomorrow is pregnant. If she is engaged today and dies tomorrow, you would have at least tasted something on her head.'

Several times, Temkeu had envisaged sitting down with famous families to discuss Fatti's engagement. He had fantasised about how he would drink palm wine only to spit it out later because a promising trader was not good enough for his Fatti. He had imagined himself turning down a worthy suitor and then confidently waiting for the next important man and his family to show up. But here he was under a palm tree with more than twenty pairs of eyes from different families, all looking at him and waiting for his decision about his daughter's future. They were not even in his compound but under a palm tree by the road! He could get up and walk away or he could stay there and prove he was a man, one capable of making a courageous decision under complex circumstances.

'Fatti will make a good wife,' Pouafo added his voice to the chorus. 'But remember that her chest is still flat. You also have to keep in mind that many other girls are as nice as Fatti, but those girls have small balls on their chest and they see some blood each month. Also, Angu here – I do not need to tell you that he is not just a titleholder but also a man with open hands. You know that many men send their daughters to go and swing their hips in front of him. So are you going to behave like a man of wisdom and give Fatti the chance that she may never again see? Are you going to offer her to a great son like Angu or are you going to reserve her for hunters and palm wine tappers?'

'Pouafo, do not waste too much spit, Angu said. 'No one can force Temkeu to play, but I still repeat that I will play with him only on the condition that I take Fatti if I win.'

'Temkeu, do not allow Angu to be declared a champion with your

hands down! Do not give him an easy title,' someone declared.

'By the way, Temkeu,' another person said, 'the talk in the village is that Mefo said that you did not want to bury Fatti on the day she first died because you were hanging on to the money you had lost through her. They say that you ...'

'Enough! Enough!' Temkeu screamed. 'If you, Angu, win this game, I will give you the hand of my daughter.'

'Which daughter?' a voice asked.

'How many daughters do I have?' Temkeu spat out.

'Temkeu has spoken like a man,' Angu stepped in. 'There is much wisdom in your words, Temkeu. I tell you that you will not regret. Bring the seeds and let us play.'

'On one condition.' Temkeu's words brought all eyes back to his face.

'What?'

'If you win I will give you Fatti only after she has cut thirteen branches from her tree.'

'No problem. Let us start the game.'

'But you will start paying the bride price now.'

'If that is how you want it, Temkeu.'

'And if I win what will I take from you?'

'If you win' – all ears opened to hear Angu's measure for Fatti's hand – 'I will divide my big farm by your compound into four parts. If you win I will give you one part.'

'Has everybody heard?' Temkeu asked.

'Yes, we have heard and we will put our weight behind you if Angu brings trouble tomorrow.'

'Let us play.'

'Wait!' The twenty or so pairs of eyes shifted backed to Angu. 'How many branches has Fatti cut from her tree?'

'Eleven.'

'Let us play.'

The rules set, the game went underway, the game that had the capacity of bringing significant change to the Fopou family. As news of the quality of the bet reached ears around the square, more and more people stopped by to receive first-hand information on the

contest of such an unprecedented scale. Though two played, it was a mammoth crowd that acknowledged the victory of one contestant about twenty minutes later.

The superstition surrounding a new playing board had prevailed. At least one person was to go home a happier man than he had set out; one person was to add to his riches in either people or in property; one person was to be the talk of the village during the next few days. That person was Angu Matamo. He had emerged victor and with that, he had won the hand of Temkeu's only daughter, Fatti Ashi.

'Bring some palm wine so that Temkeu should drink and clear his eyes,' Angu ordered the female trader.

'How many litres?'

'As many as he can drink.'

A crowd had goaded him to play, yet he was walking home alone. A crowd had watched him play, yet he was walking home alone. A crowd had joyfully acknowledged Angu's victory and the crowd was celebrating with Angu, while he was walking home alone. 'I have lost, yes, but I am not going home an angry man.' Temkeu beat his chest. 'Why had I not even closed Fatti's door since? What was I waiting for? That would have prevented me from openly betraying my manhood as I did when she was called for a visit to the land of the ancestors. Imagine how I used to fix my eyes on her chest like a hungry young man! I should really have closed Fatti's door a long time ago.' He lifted his head, looked up at the fading sun and then sighed. 'Mefo! You showed the village my nakedness, but I will show you that I am the man and my words are heavier.'

As soon as Temkeu arrived at his compound, he sent for Fatti.

'Has night come, Papa?' She walked in and stood in front of the figure warming himself by the fireplace.

He stared at her for some moments. 'Turn around.'

She did.

'Walk to my slab and back.'

She did.

He nodded and sipped some palm wine.

'Do you know Angu Matamo?'

‘Yes, Papa.’

‘On the second market day after this one, Angu and his family and I will sit down to talk about your marriage to him, which will happen when you cut thirteen branches from your tree.’

‘Yes, Papa.’

‘You can go now.’

Fatti stepped out as solemnly as she had stepped in. The door hissed her goodbye. Moments later, the door’s hinges cringed loudly as it was thrust violently.

‘You ... you ... you ... You should be ashamed! What is this I hear? I heard it on my way back from the market, but I thought it was just empty talk. Now Fatti has come and told me the same story? So you really want to sell her? Are you not ashamed? Do you not look at her age?’

‘Are you talking to me, Mefo. I thought you hated my voice more than any other sound. You have not talked to me for one week now. You should be happy that you first heard this news from strange voices which surely sound better than my own.’ Temkeu concealed a queer smile. ‘I do not want our neighbours to hear my voice this evening. So I beg you to leave my hut now. Go before your headache starts.’

‘You, Temkeu, whom I carried inside my stomach during many market weeks! Now you ask me to get out of your hut? I will not leave, and you will not marry Fatti to any man. You neglect your hammer and now you want to make easy money over Fatti’s head? She will not marry.’

‘Fatti is my child. You will not tell me what to do with her. I have given her to Angu, and nothing you say or do can change that.’

‘Look at you! Because of you I did not marry, and you again want that I live and die without having anyone to take my place? No! I will not accept it. Fatti will not marry! She will be my successor.’

‘It is nobody’s fault that you did not give birth to a girl. And who says that Fatti cannot be a married Mefo? Even as a married woman she can still be your successor.’

‘No! My successor is not to marry! Fatti is not to marry!’

‘That is your problem, Mefo. Fatti will marry and she will marry

Angu Matamo. Just two more years and she will be Fatti Angu. Two more years – that is all you have left with her. Teach her how to be a bad wife if you want, but she will marry Angu Matamo.’

‘Yes, you stand there now and talk bad against me, me who failed to marry because of you.’

‘No, Mefo, it is not because of me that you failed to marry. I am not the one who told you to have a boy.’

At these words Mefo breathed deeply and then said, ‘Our people say that the people who planted did so under the rain, but those who came to harvest did so when the sun was up and shining brightly. I will tell you only one thing and I will say it only one time: The day you give Fatti to marriage will be the day you forget that I am your mother.’ With those words, she strode out. She did not bang the door as she usually did under such circumstances. She left it ajar.

That night Temkeu slept little. However, dawn brought some brightness as some neighbours got him out of bed with congratulatory messages. Though the controversy surrounding the bargain was not lost to them, the villagers revelled in pleasant thoughts of another feast in the making. A forthcoming betrothal did not just formally announce the bonding of two families and the tying of a girl’s hands, but it was also an occasion to consume exaggerated quantities of meat and palm wine and even rare commodities like whisky. By the time the sun gilded the sky, Temkeu’s mood had lightened further. When the sun started going down, he returned home from his workshop to adopt a position in front of his hut, making himself available to any passer-by who had not yet dropped by to acclaim his achievement.

A woman with a daughter in marriage always had something to brag about. Having Angu Matamo for a son-in-law had to automatically take a mother’s joy to a higher height. With his wealth measured in farms, land and five wives, his fertility in thirty-one children and his nobility in a title, Angu’s illustriousness was never disputed.

‘Has night come, *Mbeh?*’ Nkem greeted as she walked into the compound with a *cainja* on her back. She unloaded the pods of beans to the ground, placed the *cainja* and the hoe at a corner outside her

hut, adjusted her loincloth, and then crawled back up to her husband. She opened her mouth as if to say something but closed it as though already aware that whatever was hanging on her lips would make no difference.

‘Have you come back from the farm?’

‘Yes, *Mbeh*.’ Looking everywhere but in her husband’s eyes, Nkem ventured, ‘*Mbeh*, do you not think you are rushing the child to go to a place where she will spend the night? Our people say that it is not good for a man to rush to go to a place where he will spend the night.’

‘It is better if nightfall meets her when she has already arrived at her destination, not when she is still on the way. Do not worry; Fatti will marry only after she has cut thirteen branches. And Angu is my friend; he will take good care of her.’

Following a plebiscite on the 1st of October 1961, British Southern Cameroons had opted for independence by joining the Republic of Cameroon. Hence, British Southern Cameroons was known as West Cameroon and the Republic of Cameroon as East Cameroon, both forming the Federal Republic of Cameroon. Amongst other changes, West Cameroonians had adopted the National Anthem of East Cameroon: ‘Oh Cameroon thou cradle of our fathers...’ The political situation had changed but the change remained mainly at the top and in the cities. Life in Nchumuluh and in the Fopou compound was still the same, especially for the women. Up hills, down valleys and across streams, Fatti and her mother would follow fertile land, returning home with *cainjas* full of cocoyams, corn, potatoes, cassava, cabbage and other seasonal crops. These staple crops were often supplemented by unexpected sources of insect proteins: grasshoppers which fell from the gods’ sky and crickets which burrowed out from the ancestors’ earth. Once in the compound, Fatti would return to Mefo’s hut and assist in preparing the main meal of the day, usually served as supper. Breakfast, the only other meal, existed thanks to leftovers of supper. In-between her major chores came minor ones like bathing her youngest brother and cleaning her father’s hut. At eleven and a half, Fatti’s tasks had tripled to include the duties of a wife-in-the-making.

On market days, when inhabitants from other quarters and villages came to sell and buy local produce, Fatti would try to earn some money by marketing seasonal fruits. Pears, guavas, mangoes, plums, carrots – she would carry them about in a tray on her head. Though the profit could at times be as small as five pence, it was enough to enable her mother pay the corn mill and buy washing soap.

On this Wednesday like the previous Tuesday, each denoting the weekly, rotating Country Sunday and market day, Fatti set out early in the morning just as Mosa and Totso were taking off for school. Her father had taken some of his carvings to the stall he rented on such

market days when he possessed enough stock to display, and her mother had set off to sell the vegetables she had harvested the previous day. Wearing a cloth around her breast – no longer around her waist since she was now engaged – Fatti embarked on the journey to harvest from the abundance of nature. Visiting the guava orchard just three compounds away was not considered as farming, an activity usually forbidden on Country Sundays. The time spent in the activity also had a role in determining whether it qualified as farm work. Twenty minutes up and down a tree could not be compared with hours invested in tilling or planting or harvesting.

Standing under the umbrella of a guava tree, Fatti pulled out the pair of folded trousers hidden under her cloth. As a betrothed woman, she was no longer supposed to climb trees. She had to keep her legs together until her intended decided she could start spreading them. Since the appearance of such restrictions, she had come up with a ready answer to back the source of the fruits she sold: ‘Totso went up the tree for me.’ This day she did not have Totso, but she had a pair of his trousers. She donned them and cast aside her cloth. She looked up into the tree and traced her itinerary to the branch which abounded in the ready guavas she had come for.

She had gone past the first bough and was about to head for the next when she heard a hissing sound coming from somewhere above her head. She did not look about curiously but instead closed her eyes slowly in resignation. Mosa had often warned her about snakes. He had told her that snakes, like that in the story of Creation, were attracted to women. He had warned her that she would one day encounter a snake on a tree, but she had always retorted that a snake would never recognise her as a woman since she climbed trees in trousers.

‘Ssssss! Ssssss!’ The sleek, black creature emerged from the cover of the leaves and dangled over Fatti’s head as though its intention were to dive through it and emerge somewhere in the bottom where her legs parted. ‘Ssssss! Ssssss!’ It wriggled ever closer, rapidly flitting its tongue east, west, back, forth.

Fatti was still plastered to the same spot on the tree. All she had succeeded in doing was to open her eyes and merge her gaze with the

snake's. Eyeball to eyeball, they stared at each other. At that moment she was sure of just one thing: that she would die before she felt the snake's fangs against her skin. She again closed her eyes, took a deep breath and then, composed as one who knew what she was doing, simply relinquished her grip on the branches she had been holding. The feeble bough under her feet, unable to bear her entire weight, gave way, releasing her into emptiness. The lower branches that had acted as foothold only minutes ago yielded as her feet came at them with increasing speed. Wading through the air, dropping to her death, Fatti opened her eyes and looked up one last time. The snake was right above her head, following her, its mouth wide open, a clear view of the deep darkness beneath.

It was finished. Her stay on earth was over for real. She had been given a second chance at life; a third could come only in a very nice dream. The end had come sooner than expected. At least she had been given two more years. Although the marriage was never going to be, at least another family was going to join hers in mourning. At least someone was going to stand by her father to keep vigil with her corpse. Once she got to the other side, was Mefo's father going to be there again to welcome her? But why had he sent her back to life for her to die so soon after and with so much terror? Saha T'pune. Maybe he was to be the one to welcome her this time around. Maybe...

Fatti could no longer think. All was hazy. The sky spun around and fragmented into thousands of smithereens. She felt the ground coming closer, rising to collide with her. The impact was hard. And the black snake was right above her. It landed on her stomach. Still hungry for the taste of human flesh, it dug its fangs into her arm. She did not flinch. It glided along her shoulders, over her face and then slowly grovelled away into the greenness of nature. All was still, as still as Fatti Ashi.

'I know you!' Fatti suddenly exclaimed as she looked at the man lying next to her, massaging her arm.

'I know you too, Fatti,' he said.

‘You are not Saha T’pune,’ She declared, her eyes fixed on the man’s face. ‘Where are we?’ She suddenly asked, darting her eyes about.

‘Under a guava tree.’

‘So there are guava trees too in the land of the ancestors?’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘I am sure I am going to make more money selling guavas here than in the land of the living.’

‘Fatti,’ the man said in a stern voice ‘I am not dead and I do not plan on visiting the ancestors any time soon.’

‘Wait!’ Fatti’s eyes popped out. ‘You mean that I did not die?’

‘Did you want to die?’

‘No, but the snake, the fall?’ Fatti sat up and searched her body as though for the answer.

‘There.’ The man pointed to the spot on her arm where the snake had made its incision.

Fatti looked at the area, now smeared with some brownish substance, and then at the man.

‘You have to thank the gods for putting me on your path. I was coming back from hunting when I heard you shout.’

‘Me? Did I shout?’

‘Like a woman giving birth! I followed your cry and arrived just as the snake was crawling away. The hunter in me said I should follow it, but if I had you would have died. I cried inside as I watched that good meat disappear under the elephant grass. I turned to you and used a sharp stone to wound the area around the bite. Then I removed wax from my ears and rubbed it into the wound. You really have to thank the gods because if I had not passed here, you would have now been talking and eating and selling guavas in the land of the ancestors.’

Fatti buried her head in the man’s chest. ‘Thank you very much, Chem. Let us go to the market to see my father.’

They were brushing themselves down when he asked, ‘That thing you are wearing – tell me that I am getting blind.’

‘Hey!’ Fatti flapped her uninjured hand. ‘You will not tell him. Please do not tell him. He will kill me.’

‘Stop talking and just remove it, and make sure you hide it where your hands will never again find it.’

‘Yes. Yes.’ With some difficulties, she picked up her cloth and wrapped it around her body such that it formed a loop around her neck. She then bent and pulled out the trousers from beneath the wrap. Guavas were the last thing on her mind as she followed Chem to the village square.

‘Chem, the mighty hunter, the great hunter!’ Temkeu hailed him. ‘I do not know how to thank you for pushing death away from my daughter. What if I buy some of your bush meat? Give me one *ground beef*.’

‘I do not have *ground beef* but I have *cutting grass*. Would you take it?’

‘Bush meat is bush meat. How much?’

As Chem walked away Temkeu turned to Fatti and said, ‘Just sit here. When your brother comes back from where I sent him, he will stay here in my stall so that I take you to see Tchafo. I just cannot sleep today without seeing Tchafo. He has to tell me why this kind of thing has to happen only to you.’

‘Okay, Papa, but can I go and see Mama before I come back?’

As soon as Nkem heard the news, she urged Fatti to unfailingly go to church that evening to join in praying the rosary: ‘You have to thank God for saving your life. You need to ask Mama Maria to pray to God for you.’

At Tchafo’s shrine the process was the same: Fatti stripped naked and stayed so for twenty minutes. Tchafo handed down the same order as before: ‘Drink this medicine and no water should touch your cuts for three days.’

In church, she walked to a pew and knelt down beside her fellow Cadets of Mary. The rosary lasted thirty minutes. The enthusiasm with which she made the final sign of the cross said she was relieved to see the curtains come down on one of the most eventful days of her post-resuscitation life. However, three encounters still stood between her and a peaceful night’s rest.

‘When you go back home remember to pray your rosary every day,’ the catechist said as Fatti and the other children walked out of

church. 'If you have any problem you should ask your mothers for help.'

'Can we not also ask our fathers?' one child wanted to know.

'Ask your father but only if he has shown that he has time for God.'

'My father says that his own god is inside his hut, not here inside your church,' another child said.

'Our God is everywhere,' the catechist defended.

'My father says that the white man God is not his god,' Fatti said.

'The white man God is the God of all men. It is time for you all to go home. As I have said, if you have any problem praying the rosary, ask your mothers for help.'

As soon as Fatti stepped into the compound, she was asked to report to her father's hut. He made her stand in front of his skulls. 'I thank you, my ancestors,' he prayed 'because your powerful eyes rescue our blindness. You are our eyes and our mouths, but above all, you are our hope. Thank you for giving this child more time with me. I do not know what evil is following her, but I count on you to put it to shame by giving her many more days and years. Give her life so that she will honour you '

Mefo was the last person Fatti saw that day. 'My child, what do you want to eat? Should I prepare some pounded potatoes and beans for you? Come and lie down. I will bring you food when it is ready. You are going to remain in bed until you get well.'

'But, Mefo, I am not sick.'

'If I say you are, then you are.'

The sick leave lasted five days.

The following week like any other, Fatti went about her duties as usual while her two favourite brothers, Mosa and Totso, commuted between the compound and the school. As the days sped into weeks, dragging the school year along, the routine was the same. She returned to her mother's hut from Mefo's, each morning, to set the fireside ablaze and heat up the leftover food. While Mosa, her direct follower, downed the steamy breakfast, she washed the dirty dishes of the previous evening from her mother's and Mefo's huts. As Tosto and Mosa strode out of the compound with book-laden plastic

bags in their hands, she set out for the farm carrying along the dregs from the pot – her lunch. The routine was the same day after day after day. Even Angu, the name of the major change on the scene, did not have a prominent place in Fatti's daily life. His existence was limited to Nkem's advice on how to behave in the presence of a husband's friends and Mefo cautioning about men, often offered in words far too complicated for Fatti's understanding. It was as though Mefo was eager to warn but careful not to over talk. Temkeu simply contented with bidding Fatti to age faster. Just that morning he had frowned when she had answered that she was still to cut off her twelfth branch.

After another week of respecting the routine of her toilsome weekday schedule, Fatti gave a tired yawn as the Saturday cockcrow sounded. She stretched her hands and feet but that was as far as her acknowledgement of daybreak went. That Saturday also happened to be a Country Sunday, which meant there was equally no farming for the women.

'Sh! Sh! Leave Mefo's corn. Do not put your mouth in that corn flour,' Mosa barked at a fowl as he walked into Mefo's hut. 'Fatti, you are still sleeping? Everybody in the compound got up a long time ago.' He pulled the blanket from her body. 'Fatti, get up.'

She cursed and coiled. He dragged her feet to the ground. She raised her feet back to the bed and curled them under her chin. He dipped his hand into a bowl of water and released some drops onto her face. She screamed and skipped up.

Once out of bed, Fatti immediately set to her chores by carrying her laundry, together with Mefo's, to the stream. There, alongside other peers and women, she bent over a boulder, hitting and scrubbing. On her way from the stream, she stopped every now and then to gather dry tree branches. Back home, she spread her laundry on the lawn and carried the branches to Mefo's hut, where she broke them on her kneecap and fed them into the fire. She placed a pot above the fire and picked up the broom and started sweeping. Litter varied with the planting, harvesting or packaging seasons. Her pile of dirt was composed of some sugarcane chaffs, dry corn grains, dry corn silk and cob. The bag of threshed corn was wedged at a corner

of the hut.

Her clothes clean, the meal of *Achu* prepared, the hut clean and she herself clean, Fatti set out in the direction of the hills. Four compounds away, she sprawled under the evergreen cover of a pear tree and spread out her arms and legs to welcome the gust of cool breeze dancing about. When the wind moved away, she sat up and darted her eyes about as if surveying the environment to make sure no one was watching. The coast clear, she lifted her dress and pulled out a book. It was a magazine. It was the magazine which Makam had forgotten during his last visit, which she had discovered and then buried under Mefo's mattress. Each time she had settled down to glance through it, footsteps had neared and she had returned it to hiding. She had done that so often that, in hiding it from others, she had eventually hidden it from herself for more than a year. It was only by chance that she had stumbled on it, some days ago, when she had been searching for some money from fruit sales which she had hidden under the mattress.

Sitting with her legs folded in, she placed the magazine on her lap and started leafing through. Her eyes lingered on the pictures of tanks and other military equipment. The expression on her face was blank. She was thumbing through the pages when she suddenly stopped, wet her index finger on her tongue and slowly turned back the last five pages she had just browsed. One of those pages contained a strange picture, one stranger than those of military equipment. She stopped at a page and fixed her eyes on the picture of a white man.

After a few still minutes, Fatti tossed the magazine aside and got to her feet. She twisted her body to the left and then to the right. She looked up at the green pear bush hovering over her head. Her right hand aimed for one pear that appeared so near but turned out to be quite far. What could she possibly want to do with one unripe pear compared with the basketful she usually harvested? Moreover, she still had not dug out the twenty-five or so pears she had buried near their compound two days ago – beneath the ground they ripened in three days; above, in five days.

Fatti returned to the spot where she had left the magazine. She

sat down. She intoned a song she and her peers often sang to shame a liar. While she sang she kept her eyes everywhere but on the magazine. The song over, her roaming eyes weary, she eventually looked down at the magazine. The white man was still there in the page.

‘My mother!’ she exclaimed. ‘I did not imagine it. He is real. He is looking at me. The white man in the book is real. That means Father has a brother! The brother has the same long nose and the same type of hair like the tail of a horse. His eyes too should be green like leaves. But why is there no colour in the book?’ She frowned but then recollected herself quickly. ‘The brother is thin just like the Father. They should be twins. So Fr. Max has a twin brother! Hm!’ She clapped loudly.

When she finally overcame the shock that there existed another white man, her next urge was to find someone with whom to share her discovery. Her first option was Mosa but she quickly dismissed the idea, for she knew that if Mosa laid eyes on her magazine she was never again going to see it.

During the next few days, Fatti went about as though her mind and body were in disaccord. It was obvious she barely took note of what she did, whom she saw or what she said. The only consistent thing she did was to speak to herself: ‘Should I tell Mosa? Should I tell him even though I know he may take my book?’

What brought some normality back into her life was her mother’s statement, one morning: ‘Fatti, tomorrow afternoon you will carry a message to your grandmother in Nchusa. I know that it is very far but I cannot send Mosa since he has to go to school.’

Fatti skipped from the stool where she had been sitting. ‘Can I not go in the morning, Mama?’

‘Go in the afternoon so that you spend the night with your cousins; but leave early so that you do not arrive at night.’

‘Yes, Mama, I will go after Mosa comes home for break.’

Unable to curb the excitement rocking her, Fatti took off before 11 o’clock, embarking on the journey to the remote village like one eager to set a record. Rat moles dove for their burrows as she stomped her feet. Dry leaves rustled under her soles as she over-

burdened them with her weight. A school of sparrows flew in, littering the sky and almost shielding the light of the sun, but Fatti strode on, focused and determined. She walked through green hills and valleys covered with crops, and crossed two bamboo bridges. She walked through areas where nature slept undisturbed by humans, nature in its purest form. She walked for miles without encountering another soul on the way. She walked and she walked. After investing such effort, she could not ask for a greater reward than to meet a peopled compound.

‘Fatti, oh! You people come and see Fatti,’ her maternal cousin Thomas shouted.

‘Tom, it is a good thing that you people are in. I was afraid that I would arrive and have to wait for you people to return from the farm.’

‘Have you forgotten that today is our market day? We have all just come back from the market.’

‘Fatti, how are you? Is everybody in Mumba fine? How is Mama? And how is Mefo?’ The next five minutes were spent in the exchange of greeting and inquiries about the welfare of family members on both sides. Fatti also delivered her package of words to her grandmother, Tangué Pauline. Once the elders returned to their discussions, Fatti pulled Thomas aside.

‘I want to go and fetch water. Will you come with me?’ Thomas asked before she could open her mouth.

‘What would I remain here and do with big people? Give me my own bucket.’ Bucket in her hand, cloth on her neck, Fatti followed Thomas and the path to the stream.

‘I want to show you something, Tom. Have you ever seen a white man?’ Fatti asked when they were alone.

‘White is which kind of man? A man who has rubbed chalk on his skin?’

Both burst into a gale of laughter, but Fatti’s did not last long. ‘I am talking about a very serious thing. Wait. Let me show you a white man.’

Thomas took the cue from Fatti, put down his bucket and then watched as she pulled out the magazine from beneath her dress.

Turning immediately to a flagged page, she thrust the picture of the white man in front of his eyes.

‘From where did you get that book, Fatti? That kind of man cannot live in this world.’ Thomas exclaimed. ‘That kind of man can only come out from the water.’

‘I tell you that he is a real man. Our church Father in Mumba is this kind of man. He is a white man. But I thought that he was the only white man in the whole world. Now I see that he has a brother, a twin brother.’ Fatti suddenly stopped and stared intently at the footpath. ‘But where did Fr. Max really come from? Where did he live before coming to be with us in Mumba?’

‘What are you saying?’

‘Just that our priest in Mumba is a white man.’

‘You are lying, Fatti. You are lying. That kind of man does not exist, and so he cannot have a brother. That is surely a drawing. Yes, that is a drawing which someone drew with a pencil. Only another person can draw that kind of man.’

‘I tell you that one white man lives with us in Mumba.’

‘No!’

‘Okay, where do you think your name Thomas comes from? Let me tell you that it is a white man’s name. Many times in our church, I hear the catechist and the Father call that name when they read that big book called the Bible.’

At the mention of the Bible Fatti again found herself in a haze. Who had written the Bible? It could not be Fr. Max because if so he would have told the catechist and the catechist would have told them. Again, the Bible was too big to have been written by just one person. Did it mean Fr. Max had not one but many brothers?

‘It is my aunt, my mother’s sister, your mother’s sister, who gave me the name Thomas. She lives with us here in Nchusa.’

‘What are you saying?’ Fatti jolted. ‘Ah, you are talking about your name? I do not refuse that Auntie gave you the name, but have you ever asked her where it came from? I tell you that Thomas is a white man’s name.’

‘Okay, since you are insisting, I will come to Mumba so that you show me that man you call a white man.’

‘Yes! You will take your two eyes and see him for yourself.’

As if to seal their deal, peals of thunder blasted from the sky, urging Fatti and Thomas to lift their heads in time to catch the sky crack open to let through bright rays of light. While Fatti hastily tugged the magazine into her dress, Thomas stepped into the nearby bush and returned with a strip from the bark of a plantain stalk. He tied the strip around Fatti’s waist to hold the book in place. They then rushed to the stream as fast as their feet could carry them. Buckets dangling on their heads, Fatti’s supported with the cloth pad, they arrived at home just as the sky completely became grey. The first battle won, they engaged in the second but not before Fatti had carefully and discreetly tucked the magazine under the hay mattress of the bed where she was to sleep. Flaunting a big smile, she joined Thomas in the yard, where they took to positioning all available bowls and basins to trap raindrops bound to glide down the leaves of plantain plants. By the time they accomplished their tasks, the first raindrops had left their imprints on their bodies.

Back under the shed of the roof, they looked into each other’s eyes and then at their bodies and then at the downpour and then at the adults buried in conversation inside the huts. Next thing, they dashed into the rain. As the seconds ticked by, they were transformed from clean, dry-clothed children to dirty, drenching creatures. Clothes plastered to their skins, raindrops hanging on their lashes, they danced about rhapsodically. Though they constantly wiped their eyes in an effort to keep out the raindrops, each blink took the drops right inside their eyes. The rain and ecstasy over, the quivering, red-eyed pair crawled homeward, clearly hoping to sneak into the compound unnoticed.

When the stars covered the skies and silence fell over the compound and quarter, Fatti joined one of her aunts in one of the four beds rooted at the four angles of the square hut. Instead of sleeping, she kept twisting and turning.

‘My bones ache as though I am fighting with the bed. It would have been better to sleep on the bare floor since it is level. On this thin hay mattress, it seems as if my clothes and flesh have melted away. It is as if the contact is between my bones and the lathing

bones of the bed. What a comfort Mefo's bed is! And the cold – it soaks in through my nose to fill every fiber of my being.' Such was a version of the account she had given Tamu some months ago following her first night in Mumba.

When Fatti took the road back to Mumba the following day, the mystery over the white man had increased rather than decreased. Though her anxiety had reduced, she still wished she could share her discovery with someone eager for information. Holding a cocoyam leaf over her head to divert the rain, dipping her feet into puddles of mud as she trudged along, she carried her disappointment and her treasure back to its hiding place at home, hoping the sort of opportunity she desired would present itself soon.

Temkeu had lived through many mornings but this one was proving to be different in every way. Before leaving his house, he described his second wife's breakfast as chicken feed offered to dogs and referred to Fatti as his thirteenth son. Children on his path ran home to report to their parents that he was walking like an unmasked nocturnal *juju* lost in daylight. Adults around the market square interpreted his resolute and vigorous imprints on the dust as those of a man stung by a snake, who was aware there was no antivenin and who was not willing to die alone. As he stomped along, he answered none of the customary greetings; none were offered. If different groups of individuals described his mood in different words, they all had the same prayer when he took the path that led to the Catholic Mission. One onlooker spoke out for the others: 'I think we have to pray to our gods. We have to go on our knees and beg them to go and tell the white man's God to come down quickly and help his priest.'

Temkeu walked up to the presbytery door. 'They say that they call you Mr. Father; where are you?' he bellowed. 'Where are you? Stop hiding behind stones. Come outside and let us talk things man to man.'

'Who is there?' Fr. Max inquired from inside the house as he unbolted the door.

'Come here and tell me! You ... you and your brothers ... you people look for trouble among yourselves—'

'Pa Fopou, it is you,' Fr. Max said in a concerned tone. 'I do not know why you are raising your voice but just calm down and come inside. Come inside and sit down so that we talk gently about the issue troubling you.'

'No! I will not talk gently and I will not enter your house. That is how you people always do it. With honey in your mouths you call us to come; but once we are inside you give us one spoon of honey and three spoons of a mixture of pepper and ginger. No! I will not come inside!'

‘Pa Fopou, if I have done anything that is wrong, please tell me.’

‘Your brothers in all your countries look for trouble among yourselves and then come and take us to go and help find a solution,’ Temkeu yelled. ‘In this our village, when trouble grows in our midst, we go to the palace and talk to the *Fon* and elders so that they tell us how to weed it out. At times, we may even clash because we disagree with the wisdom of our elders on how to solve the problem. What we never do is to go to another village and call people from there to come and kill themselves because they want to help us.’

‘Pa Fopou,’ Fr. Max said ‘I just beg that you tell me the thing which is disturbing you in this kind of way. Maybe I can—’

‘You can do what? Tell your brothers to come and catch us here so that we too go and look for solutions to their problems?’ Temkeu took a step forward and lifted his forefinger into Fr. Max’s face. ‘You people killed my cousin when he went to your country to help you stop your second big war. Now again you people have killed my son. You have taken away my Makam. My Makam!’ He hit his chest as he repeated his son’s name. ‘I suffered to send him to school. I gave him all I had. I put all into him so that he would become big and help his younger brothers. He went to your country only to increase the size of his head, but your country people killed him!’

‘I am sorry to hear this kind of bad news about your son, Pa Fopou. Come inside and sit down so that we can talk about it.’

‘No! I will not come inside. Tell your people to give me back my son – that is all I want.’

Fr. Max sat down on the veranda, took a deep breath and then sighed. ‘You see, Pa Fopou, all men are created by the same God who—’

‘I do not want to hear anything about your God! You people came here, took our goods, then our people to go and work for you, then our brothers to go and fight for you. What did you give us in return? Your God! Whenever we try to open our eyes, you close them with your God. I do not want to hear anything about that God. Stay with your God but give me back my son.’

Temkeu strode away.

Fr. Max gawped after him.

Fatti and the other girls, whose Cadets of Mary session had been disrupted by the raised voices, eyed Fr. Max askance.

Once out of the Mission precincts, Temkeu's stride became an absentminded lumber. After one hour of trudging through five paths that led anywhere but to his compound, Temkeu finally made it home. 'Where is that Nkem in this compound? Nkem, where are you?'

'She has not come back from the farm,' Mosa answered.

'Mosa, what are you doing in the compound at this hour? Are you not supposed to be in school?'

'I came for break, Papa.'

'Where is everybody?'

'Everybody has not come back from the farm.'

'Okay, since you are the only one who has come back from the farm, tell Nkem that I do not ever—'

'Temkeu, why are you shouting like that? What is the matter?' Angu Matamo asked. 'I heard your voice right from my compound. If there is a problem, we need to sit down and discuss it gently. You know that the man who uses up his energy before the war would have none left when the fight begins. So calm down, come and sit down and tell me the problem.' As Angu spoke, he pulled Temkeu towards the three stools under the mango tree.

'Allow me to talk, Angu. Let spit splash out from my mouth. Let me confront my shadow since that is the limit of my power. Just let me talk.'

'Why are you talking like this? Has something happened?'

Temkeu simply turned to Mosa and said, 'Go to the farm and call everybody to come back right now. Bad news has hit the compound.'

'What are you talking about Temkeu,' Angu asked. 'What has happened?'

Temkeu stared into Angu's eyes. 'I knew that attacking the white man with words would just be like confronting an evil spirit with a cutlass, but I had to do it. I had to do it, Angu!'

'You frighten me when you talk like that, Temkeu. What is the matter?'

'1943. I will never forget that year, the year when Mucheu had

been invited to go and see the white man's country, but only if he wore the army khaki uniform.' Temkeu sighed. 'Every day I had gone to Pauafo Fatamba to get the latest news on the war. Everyday there had been no news.' Temkeu sighed again. 'Then that day arrived, the day I wish I had no ears. All I decided to remember and still remember from the words of the man who stood in front of my door with the news is: "... the territory is very proud of your cousin who gave his life for peace in the world.'" Temkeu stopped for a while and cast his head down. 'What had Makam given his life for? Who or what had killed him? I only wish someone will appear to take away some of my pain by giving me answers! Oh, Makam! Oh, my Makam! Why did such a thing have to happen to you? Why? Why?'

Two weeks after the news of Makam's death, the Fopous still spent the nights surrounded by sympathisers, who turned up for the daily vigils. Every evening, the village converged at the Fopou compound and continued where they had left off the previous evening. Two weeks after, the days were no longer as congested as the nights. Family members from Nchusa and other villages and quarters, who had spent the entire first week with their bereaved relations, had gradually started embarking on the long journeys back to their homes. The Fopous had also stopped loafing around waiting for news about the whereabouts of Makam's corpse and had gradually learnt to incorporate their mourning into their daily activities – the women had regained the road to their farms and the boys to farm or school. Temkeu still stayed at home.

'Two weeks have passed since the news of Makam's death killed me. Two weeks! And the only other information that has reached my ears is silence, not even a body.' Temkeu was sitting under the mango tree in his compound.

'Temkeu, are you talking alone?' Angu said as he walked in through the path that separated both compounds.

'How can I be talking alone? I am talking with Makam.'

Angu let out a deep sigh as he sat on one of the stools standing

idling in the empty compound.

'I am telling Makam that I know all the talking I gave to that man in the Mission cannot bring him back. Yes, I cannot bring him back but I can stop my woman from continuing to join hands with the people who killed my Makam.'

'Yes, Temkeu, it is true that Makam died before his time and that he died with gold in his palms. But we do not even know the true story behind his death. We do not even know the white man country in which he was learning big book. When we heard that he had gone to study in Nigeria, we were very happy. But he did not return to tell us that he was going to a white man country. So we do not even know the country in which he died.'

'I do not want to know! All I know is that first, they took my cousin to fight their war; and they killed him. Now, my son went only to learn big book; and they have killed him too. The man who climbs on the back of a tiger has to know that one day he will enter into the tiger's stomach.'

'Your words are full of wisdom, Temkeu; but you know that there is nothing we can do. Just tie your heart like a man.'

'No! There is one thing I can do. I can prevent those people from taking another member of my family. I never ever again want to see Nkem carry her stupid feet to that church. I will warn her, but if Mefo decides to support her just to sharpen my anger, then the two of them would go and build their compound and live inside.'

'Temkeu—'

'Just tell Nkem, tell your mother-in-law when she comes back because if I stand in front of her I will kill her too. White people have killed my Makam, and she wants to take my Fatti and give them too? I will kill her, oh!'

'I have heard what you have said. I will tell Nkem to shake the white man dust off her feet.'

Temkeu looked at Angu and started saying something about his betrothal to Fatti, but he changed his mind and instead said, 'Sleep is coming into my eyes.'

Angu murmured a few more words of sympathy and left.

Sleep was the last thing Temkeu did once inside his hut. First, he

had a discussion with his intercessors. He walked to his slab, pulled a stool and sat staring into the empty sockets of his ancestors' remains. These could have been portraits of departed ones hanging on a wall, but they were people as portraits can never be. 'What did I do to have this kind of trouble land on my head?' Temkeu asked them. 'If I have done something which is not good, I beg that you people should tell me. First, you people took Fatti. After seeing my pain, you became sorry and sent her back. Four years have not passed and you have taken my Makam. If he had died in a car accident, I would have understood. If he had been lying on a sick bed, I would have understood that you people at least wanted us to say goodbye to each other. But now, even his body to add fertility to our land, even his skull to recover after two years, nothing! I have nothing! Where would his spirit live? In a stone? In a pot? What would I tell the children he has left behind? What would Nchumuluh say about me? Why does it always have to be me? Why does it always have to be the Fopou compound? Why do you allow people to mock you through me? "Where are his ancestors?" they often ask. "Are they asleep? Are they tired? Are they too old to act?" Why do you allow me to see so much pain?'

Temkeu went on for ten minutes. Unable to compress his sorrow within the walls of his chest, he opted for release in the simplest yet most demeaning way possible for a Nchumuluh man. He wept, long and hard, tears of Fatti's death multiplied by a thousand. 'Maybe Makam's death is my punishment from the gods, punishment because I did not cry for Fatti like a father but like a trader who had lost valuable property.'

Indeed, Temkeu had allowed his greed for bride price to precede that pain he should have felt as a father. However, given that he was more concerned about losing the bride price Fatti represented, why then was he so consumed by the death of Makam – one who instead gave away in the form of bride price? The answer was evident. All he had to do was to look around his hut and see it in almost every item: the blanket on his bed, the thick pullover hanging on his wall, the bottle of whisky at the far end of the slab – Makam was all over. He was all over, in every hut in the compound: school fee subvention for

the boys, dresses for Fatti, cooking oil for the women, comfortable mattress for Mefo. Who was now going to provide all those goods? Who was going to replace Makam? How could the village expect him to say goodbye to his Makam in a couple of hours? Worn out and drenched in a mixture of tears and sweat, Temkeu crept into his bed.

When Angu Matamo walked into the hut at about 4.00 p.m., Temkeu had not stirred. Being the first among the sympathizers to arrive, Angu started displaying the stools and making other arrangements. With no further news available after the two-week interval following the initial news of Makam's death, the palace had scheduled a symbolic funeral for the following day, meaning activities had to begin on the eve. By dusk, the Fopou compound was full of men, women and children of Nchumuluh. Like during the past two weeks, they had come to pay their respects and to ponder over this sort of news which had never before visited their ears. That they would never again see Makam's body? That there would be a funeral after the Second World War without a body was unheard of.

At that precise moment in April 1962, Nchumuluhans had a major adaptation problem stemming from the fact that West Cameroon had just given up the Sterling for the Franc *CFA* of East Cameroon. Nchumuluhans thus blamed their adaptation difficulties and currency-exchange losses on the French. Knowing little about the world beyond their country, except their colonial masters of Germany, France and the United Kingdom, Nchumuluhans decided to put Makam's blood on French hands: 'Makam died in the French man's country. Our ancestors revealed it to us in a dream.' The statement was followed by a repeated declaration to fight Frenchification with every muscle in their bodies.

'This thing is terrible. So for the first time ever, the palace has decided that a stone or earth will be kept in honour of someone?'

The *Fon's* decree was inspired by the traditional lore stipulating that if a family member other than the designated successor clung to a skull – in order to gulp down the material sacrifices offered to that spirit – the lawful successor was to take a stone, scratch it on the skull and then give it a worthy seat like any other skull. This law was closely related to another which stated that if a person's skull could

not be retrieved for one reason or another, a designated family member was to undergo a cleansing ceremony during which libations were to be poured on a spot on the ground. Earth from that spot was then to be recovered and preserved as a home for the roaming spirit. As a mediator between the gods and men, spirits needed to have homes in the land of the living.

With Makam's two sons still too young, the responsibility to choose a home for his spirit fell on the eldest surviving male member of the Fopou family. As soon as darkness completely claimed the skies, some elders led Temkeu to Tchafo's shrine. As Tchafo poured palm wine on the chosen spot outside his shrine, Temkeu repeated after him:

'Makam, I invite your spirit into this new home.'

'Makam, I invite your spirit into this new home.'

'Makam, I invite your spirit into this new home.'

Tchafo then carried out some other rituals, after which he dug out the earth and filled a skull-size clay pot. He handed the pot to Temkeu.

Silence accompanied Temkeu and the elders on their return journey. An upsurge of wailing greeted them as they came in view of the Fopou compound. Flanked on both sides by the elders, Temkeu walked solemnly into his hut, the pot held upright in both hands. As he approached, the elders and titleholders sitting inside his hut stood up. Temkeu walked up and placed the pot on his slab. That brought to three the number of skulls in his keeping.

The death celebration continued that day and the following day with the traditional rites and dances. A bereaved family always scrupulously carried out the rites and sacrifices, for popular belief held that failure to do so would prevent the spirit from either crossing over to, being welcomed or living happily in the land of the ancestors. A roaming spirit, one which had not made or failed to make a smooth transition to the land of the ancestors or one which had no earthly home, was usually more of a threat to the family. Hence, the death rites were not only carried out as send-off for the dead, but they were also some sort of protection for the living.

The deceased needed a companion to accompany him on the

journey to the land of the ancestor. Consequently, one of the major rites was to immolate a goat. It was also believed that blood had to be shed as a preventive measure against further deaths in the family. Usually, each son of the deceased offered a goat or fowl for the sacrifice, depending on their means. If the deceased had no son, his family offered one goat. The meat from the sacrificed animals was shared out to all the mourners. In case of insufficiency, the elders and title-holders were given priority.

The traditional dances marked the official close of the death celebration. According to Nchumuluhans, these had a dual meaning: the celebration of life and the sending-off of the deceased. Another major rite was the hair-shaving ritual which normally came a day after the official death celebration. Close relatives of the deceased shaved hair off their heads and faces as a sign of respect to their departed loved one. Likewise, new growth paid homage to and strengthened life.

Makam's death celebration came and went, but day after day, the Fopou family continued to lick its wounds. It took a week for the first traces of normality to return to the compound and the lives of its occupants. The official period of mourning would last a year.

Three weeks after Makam's death and one week before Easter, Fatti was on her way to the farm when she ran into Fr. Maxworth Cain.

'Fatti, come my daughter,' he called out.

'No, Father, I am going to the farm.' She spoke as though for the attention of someone other than the priest. Nchumuluh was a small village, one in which community unity had precedence over all else, a place where unseen eyes followed, scrutinising and reporting if only to preserve that spirit of harmony.

'I hear your father says that you should not come to church again?'

By the time the last words tumbled out of Fr. Max's mouth, Fatti had tripled her pace, running as though her life depended on the distance she put between the priest and herself. She ran like a police officer, the only innocent person who runs on the street. She ran all the way to the farm.

Five hours later, as she was trudging into the compound, tired and hungry, Totso greeted her with the news that their father had asked to see her the minute she returned from the farm. Fatti froze.

'What did you do?' Totso asked in a concerned voice. 'You see, he came back very early from his workshop and immediately sent Mosa to go and bring you from the farm. When Mosa came back with news that he had not seen you, Papa just started shouting at everybody and everything, the chair and the weather. After every five minutes, he sends his head through his window to ask if you have not yet returned. You know that when he does that it means anger is cooking inside him. Tell me, what did you do?'

Thawed enough to move her lips Fatti mumbled, 'I did nothing wrong. I am innocent.' She tossed aside the small bundle of dry tree branches which had been resting on her head. 'I tell you the truth: I did nothing.' Tears were now rolling down her face. 'Father wanted to speak with me, but I refused to listen to him. I tell you the truth: I did not talk with him. I did not even look at him.'

‘Which Father?’

‘Father in the Mission – Fr. Max. But I did not talk with him. I did not even listen to him. I did not stop running until I reached the farm.’

Totso picked up the bundle of firewood, took the hoe from Fatti and said, ‘Do not cry. If you cry he will say that you are guilty, and he will beat you very well. Just wipe your eyes and go to him. When he starts whipping you open your mouth wide, shout aloud and then run outside. You hear?’

‘He is going to beat me when I have done nothing wrong? I tell you that I did nothing wrong. I did not talk with Fr. Max.’

‘I know that you are saying the truth but you know how Papa is. Just do as I have told you. When he starts whipping you shout and run outside. You hear?’

Fatti nodded.

‘Wipe your eyes and go to him.’

‘Ey, Eh, I beg. Ey, Eh, I will not do it again. I beg,’ Fatti screamed as her father slashed the cypress stem all over her body. When she tried to dash for the door, he caught her wrist and imprisoned it in his hand until he was satisfied he had beaten the lesson into her. Her body a bed of welts, her eyes dripping, she emerged from her father’s hut fifteen minutes after she had stepped inside.

‘Come, Fatti.’ Totso was waiting for her at the corner. She saw him but moved on as though he were a shadow. ‘Come, Fatti.’ He looked over his shoulder towards their father’s hut before following her. Once out of eyeshot of their father’s hut, he pulled her into his arms and gently rocked her sore body.

The following day Fatti did not take the road to the farm that passed through the Mission. She followed a longer track with a hanging bridge and grass blades which tunnelled around her. As long as she was sure to avoid her new worst enemy, she proved ready to reconcile with some former foes.

Easter came and went with Fatti and her mother remaining indifferent towards this very important Christian feast. After participating in all Holy Week activities since the advent of

Christianity in their village, it was difficult for them to sit by and watch as their friends and peers patronised the Mission grounds. The tolling of the church bells had changed from being that sound which urged them to get ready for Mass to one which sadly reminded them of days gone by.

The changes in Fatti's life went only as far as church was concerned. Her day still started with heating up leftovers for Mosa's breakfast; and the farm was still a major item on her daily agenda. Cuddling in Mefo's warm bed was the highlight of her day, according to what she told her friends on the rare occasions they met. There, she buried her troubles. However, on this particular evening there appeared to be some trouble in her heart which could not be buried. She tapped her feet as she waited for Mefo to return from her bath and take her seat in front of the hearth.

Finally, both women sat warming themselves in front of the fire. Mefo was getting extra warmth from pipe. Just as Fatti was about to open her mouth, Mefo spoke out: 'Climb into the *banda* and bring down some corn.'

Fatti got up from her stool, walked a few steps and stood looking up into the dark opening in the ceiling. She lifted her hands and pulled down the bamboo ladder whose bottom edge was often left hanging out. The top leaning against the ceiling opening, she placed her right foot on the first rung. Satisfied that the ladder was stable, she carried the lamp and started the ascent. One minute she was up and the next down, carrying a basket of dry ears of corn gathered from the rafters. As the cassava simmered, the two women took to threshing the corn, each into a raffia basket.

'Mefo,' Fatti broke the silence. Seemingly oblivious of the raffia basket lying on her laps, she picked up some threads of dry corn silk, fed them into the fire and watched as they disappeared in the flames. She remained unmoved even as the flames rose to her fingers in pursuit of the few threads caught in her nails.

'Is something worrying you, my child?'

'Yesterday, I dreamt that I saw your father, your father who sent me back to this life.'

Without taking her eyes off the corn she was threshing, Mefo

asked in a composed tone, 'What happened in the dream?'

'He was looking at me. Is that a good or a bad dream?'

Mefo was silent for some minutes. 'It is not good when a dead man comes and takes something from you in a dream.' Mefo paused briefly. 'It is bad when he comes and asks you to follow him.' Another short pause. 'When he comes and gives you something, that is not bad. You say that your great-grandfather was just looking at you. That is not bad. But what does he really want from you?' Though she continued to stare at the corn, her fingers stopped all activity. 'First, he drives you from the land of the ancestors, and then he comes and shows you his face in a dream. Hm!'

Using some shredded cornhusk to protect her hands, Fatti opened the pot and tasted the cassava. Judging it need more water, she got up and headed for the bucket by the slab. When she regained her seat, Mefo continued: 'We can drive him away so that he does not come to you again.'

'Drive him?' Fatti seemed more alarmed by the prospect of driving away a spirit from dreams than by actually chasing away her great grandfather.

'All you need to do is to take some wood ash in your hands and blow it as you tell him to go away. You have to talk to him as if he is standing in front of you. If you do that he will not come again.'

'But why should I send away your father when he showed me medicine for your illness.'

'What? But you said he was just standing there.'

'Yes, but he held the leaves in his hands.' She got up, opened a pot and returned with some fresh leaves. 'This is the plant which I harvest on my way from the farm today.'

Mefo was dumbfounded.

'He did not say it was for you but I know it is for you. This medicine is going to stop that headache which has been troubling you.'

'Fatti, are you sure of what you are saying?' Mefo asked. 'It is true that some people come back from the land of the ancestors with powers to heal. But you are just a child.'

'I came back with a message for Saha T'pune. That is the real reason why I came back. Maybe your father is simply using me to heal you. You have taken many medicines which have not helped you. This is the right one.'

'Do not tell anybody about this,' Mefo said as she took the plant from Fatti.

The next day Fatti skipped out of bed with a light step, and she did not stop whistling as she went about her duties. She returned home from the farm at about midday to find a surprise waiting for her: Thomas, her cousin from Nchusa. He was pacing up and down the yard.

'Fatti, I am happy that you have finally come back. I was already thinking that I would have to spend the night here. Since I do not have much time left, let us go right now and see that person you say is a white man? I have not slept well since you came to Nchusa. So I beg that we should just go and see that man. I have to start going back very soon.'

Fatti shuddered as the words hit home. 'I do not know any white man; and I have much work to do. You better start going now if you do not want night to meet you on the way.'

'Ah Fatti, are you not the one who begged to bring me to Mumba only to show me a man like that drawing in your book? Where is the book even?'

'I do not know. It is missing. I have to go and carry water now.' As she spoke she walked away towards Mefo's hut.

'You see, I said that you were lying, but you repeated to me that you had a white man here in Mumba. All my friends are waiting for me to come back and tell them more about the white man. I am sure they will be standing on the road, just waiting to welcome me. Are you not ashamed that you have lied to so many people, Fatti?'

'But what I said was true.'

'Then let us go so that you show me the white man. I want to take my two eyes and see that type of man. I cannot accept that such a man lives if I do not see him with my own two eyes.'

Fatti thought for a while. She weighed her options of either defending her honour or disobeying her father. 'I have to go and fetch water.'

'Hey Fatti, so you were really lying! I will tell everybody. I told you that such a man could not be of this world. Bye bye. Let me go so that night does not meet me on the way.' Thomas took a few steps and turned again to look at Fatti. 'Even you, Fatti? I did not know that you too could tell such a big, fat lie.'

'I have told you that I am not lying.'

'Bye, bye.'

As Thomas walked away, a sullen Fatti took the path towards Mefo's hut. Inside the hut she lit the fire and placed a pot of yams on it. She sat on the bed and pulled out the magazine from its resting place beneath the mattress. She placed the magazine on her laps and bent her head over it. It was in that position that Mosa found her twenty minutes later, as he walked in from school.

'What are you doing, Fatti?'

'Oh, have you come back?' She twitchingly shoved the magazine to the mattress and covered it with her buttocks. 'I ... I ... I was—'

'Do not fear me, Fatti, but fear your father,' Mosa teased. 'I hear Thomas came here?'

'Yes. He has already gone back to Nchusa. He said that I should greet you.'

'Did his mother send him?'

'Yes. She harvested potatoes and sent some to Mefo.'

'I see.'

Fatti rolled her eyes in relief when Mosa turned to go. But he hesitated at the door.

'Have you seen the bag of potatoes which Thomas brought?' she asked. 'It is just near Mama's hut. Go and see it.'

'I am tired. I feel like sitting down.' Mosa walked back into the hut, pulled a stool and placed it near Mefo's bed, just by Fatti's feet.

'Did you not hear your name? It is as if someone is calling you.' She inclined her head towards the door as she spoke.

'There is no big person in the compound. So who can be shouting out my name? Anyway, I am very tired.' Mosa yawned and

leaned into the bed.

‘I tell you that I heard your name. Just answer, then go and see. No, do not answer because it may be the devil. Just go outside and see who is calling for you.’

Concerned, Mosa got up and walked towards the door. Fatti followed closely behind him.

‘Go and look inside Mama’s hut. Maybe she is already back from the farm.’

Once Mosa disappeared into their mother’s hut, Fatti dashed back into Mefo’s and returned the magazine to its hiding place. She walked out to the yard just as Mosa was walking out of their mother’s hut.

‘Mosa, I need some firewood.’

‘I have told you that I am tired. I will split wood later, after I have eaten.’

‘Mosa,’ Fatti said then hesitated.

‘What?’

‘Mosa, I want to ask you something.’ Again she hesitated but then rushed on as though afraid she may change her mind: ‘What do they call a big book which has pictures inside?’

Mosa laughed. ‘Fatti, why are you talking about books? You do not have to know anything about books. Ask me anything about the farm and kitchen and I will tell you right now.’ He smiled but abruptly twisted his brow. ‘Where did you even see that kind of a book?’

‘I have never seen it,’ Fatti said a little too fast. ‘Just forget it. I did not ask you any question.’

‘You do not even have to ask questions because only pupils ask questions to their teachers. Only the ...’ He was still speaking when Totso, two of their other brothers and some friends appeared with a toy car. The wheels of the car had been cut out from the soles of rubber flip-flops. The bodywork was composed of bamboo sticks tied and nailed together. Rising from the bamboo structure standing on four rubber wheels was a stick topped with a bamboo steering wheel. While Mosa became part of the buoyant group running behind the car, Fatti walked away, sighing. She was no longer allowed to play

such games. She was almost at her mother's door when some unusual scent met up with her, some scent like charred yam. She turned around and ran into Mefo's hut.

'Is this what you will do when you are in your husband's house?' Nkem screamed as she walked into the compound a few minutes later. 'Is this how you will go and shame me in my in-law's compound?'

It was 1963. Fatti Ashi was thirteen. Hide and seek and other childish games had died natural deaths. Her mother had allowed her to start plaiting her hair. Her father had her given her permission to follow her mother to women's gatherings. Mefo still considered her a child, not a woman being prepared for marriage.

Two years had gone by since Fatti's betrothal, time during which the few drops of guilt Mefo had splattered on Temkeu had completely dried off – every step he took said he was eagerly waiting to be officially crowned as father of a bride. Yet as the first days of the first week of February 1963 slowly crept by, Temkeu's anxiety could be read on his face. One evening he became so anxious that he decided to let the burden out to the most attentive pairs of ears around: 'I think I should walk up to Angu, perform a cutlass dance and make him spit out the date of the traditional wedding,' he said to the skulls on his slab. 'Look at somebody who almost disgraced me just because he wanted to win my daughter's hand. Now he is just there playing with time as if she is not important, as if I am not important! Has he forgotten that I am Temkeu? He forgot friendship when he saw an opportunity to take up his shoulders. I will show him that I too can forget friendship when my honour is hanging in the air.'

Temkeu paused and looked keenly at the three skulls. As intense as the silence was, so real was the message that came across. Inspired by the wisdom of his ancestors, Temkeu said in a low voice, 'Yes, let me not let my anger reduce my height. Indeed, an argument with Angu can easily be misinterpreted. A woman's place is either in her father's compound or in her husband's compound. A girl has to be confident that she will always have a place in her father's house. Therefore, the people will frown at me if they conclude that I am

trying to push my daughter out of my compound. Yes, I have no choice but to continue to invite patience into my bed until Angu decides that he is ready for his new wife.’ Temkeu sighed. ‘Patience, patience, patience – I have been living with patience since that day under the palm tree. I have been eating and sleeping with patience, counting the days until this year. I used my own cutlass to cut off the number thirteen branch from Fatti’s age tree. Now again I have to continue living with patience as I wait for the mighty *Soo* Angu Matamo to decide it is time for a new wife.’

A guilty smile crept into Temkeu’s face. ‘Well, let me not condemn Angu a lot, for he has indeed been playing his role of son-in-law. During the past two years, he has been very kind to us, offering us gifts of whisky, firewood, cloths, palm oil and meat. Proud as he is he always makes sure the village is witness to his kindness to my family. I have enjoyed all that, it is true; but now I want him to come and take his wife home, if not people may start laughing at me. Angu has to come sometime soon. He just has to come one of these days, or I will attack him through the back door. If he does not come soon I will visit a witchdoctor and spit out my desire.’ As he uttered the last sentence, he quickly turned from his slab and walked out the hut.

On the third day of the third week of September 1963, Temkeu got out of bed with bags under his eyes. He set out for his pottery and carving workshop, but four hours later there was nothing to show for the time invested – the lump of clay had not changed much since he had unlocked the door and taken it into his hands. When he got home that evening he walked directly to his hut, ignoring Achile and his second wife who sat selecting vegetables in front of the latter’s hut. Indoors, he took off his *jumper* and replaced it with a loincloth. He sat on his bed and waited. Some minutes later Achile walked in with the message that warm water for his bath was waiting for him at the bath area. By the time he returned from bathing, Achile had lit the fire and brought in his supper. That was her duty

week.

Temkeu sat in front of the fireplace, washed his hands in the bowl of water standing nearby and picked up the plate of *achu* in his left hand. He dipped his right forefinger into the crater lake of yellow soup in the middle of the plate. Raising the finger to his mouth, he wrapped his tongue round it and sucked hard. He released the finger, returned it to the plate, curved it around the outer part of the mountain of pounded cocoyams, dipped it into the crater of soup and raised it to his mouth. He picked up a large chunk of meat from the soup, stared hard at it and then dropped it back into the soup. He pushed the plate of food aside and washed his hands.

Unlike people who could be unreliable in times of need, Temkeu's ancestors were always present, ever ready to lend ear to his moans. 'The only thing I succeeded in doing all day was to keep Angu Matamo on my mind. And the more I thought about him, the more restless I became. The one event for which I had wanted Fatti to live, expecting joy from it, is now the one issue which has turned me into an owl. Could Mefo have visited Angu and influenced him? No, Angu is not a man to be influenced and certainly not by a woman.' Looking squarely at the skulls he asked, 'Why do such things have to happen only to Fatti? Why? If women had a voice, I am sure she would have come up to me a long time ago to ask why her marriage was taking so long. Some of her friends who were engaged after her are already mothers. We have all eaten before cooking, reaped before planting, we all but Fatti – I will not count Mefo because she is the one who refused to put her finger on anything coming from Angu.' Temkeu took a deep breath. 'Carrying a woman about to my workshop, to The People's Club and to you is a strange feeling, one I do not like, but one I have not succeeded in driving away.'

The last person to enter Temkeu's hut at night was often the first one to get out in the morning, a privilege given to the wife he picked for the night. Unlike some of his polygamous friends who functioned with a prearranged timetable, Temkeu's mood determined which of his three wives he picked as bedmate for the night. Just about any factor could influence his choice on who got the opportunity to

perform the most infrequent of her spousal duties. However, for several weeks Temkeu had been sleeping alone and getting up alone, locking his door at night and opening it in the morning.

As he got out of bed that morning, everything about his mood said it was time he put his mind at ease and his household back on track. Fifteen minutes later, he stood on the path that separated his compound from Angu's. But each step forward was neutralised by one backward. After one minute of going but not going, moving but not arriving, Temkeu turned around and walked back to his hut and slab.

'Makam,' he called out audibly 'you are there with your great-grandfathers. I do not know what your sister, Fatti, has done wrong, but I ask that you beg the gods that this marriage with Angu should work. Beg them to make Fatti see the light in her life. I wanted to go and talk to Angu, but I think it is too early to visit him. As soon as the sun is high up in the sky, I will carry my concern to Angu. I count on you people to bless this very important mission. Anoint my lips and fill my mouth with the right words. Angu is an important man; I do not want him to stand across me but with me. I just want that he should come and take his responsibilities. I beg that you should show me how to do it.'

Temkeu stayed in his hut for the rest of the morning and afternoon. Inhaling snuff and sneezing, cursing and meditating, pacing and counting the minutes, he waited for evening with more anxiety than he had waited for sunrise. He was preparing to go out when the pounding sound of approaching footsteps caught his attention. He leaped from the front of his slab and looked through his window. A delegation was approaching from the direction of Angu's compound. He did not need to inquire, for the sight of a jug of palm wine in the hands of Angu's uncles and other male relatives told only one story: There was going to be jubilation in the compound where their feet led.

Still watching unobserved, Temkeu followed the delegation to Nkem's hut. Some minutes later, the sound of a famous fertility song drifted out of Nkem's hut, accompanying the delegation as it headed in the direction of his. He immediately darted from the window and

sat on his bed, pretending to be inspecting some of his potteries.

‘Are you in, *Mbeb?*’ Nkem walked in. ‘Angu’s family members have come for a special visit. They have come to *knock door*. My voice is too small; so I bring them to you.’ She stepped aside.

Angu’s representatives moved forward. During the minutes that followed, kola nuts were broken and shared, the bride price was agreed on in terms of firewood, meat, oil and cash, and the date of the traditional wedding was fixed for the following week.

Beautified with camwood and tying an expensive loincloth offered by her fiancé’s family, her neck and wrists adorned with beads, her hair plaited with black thread Fatti, accompanied by Susannah, Angu’s daughter, and some other friends, danced into her father’s hut and demurely stooped in front of Angu. Smiling at the teasing of men folk gathered around, Angu sipped some palm wine from his horn and handed the horn to his bride-to-be. With both hands, Fatti accepted the horn, sipped and offered it back to Angu, whose eyes had not moved from the tiny, firm nodules erupting on her chest. Absorbing the admiring glances from the men, Fatti walked out, this time escorted by her brother-in-law. She now belonged to the Angu clan. She was now Fatti Angu.

Amidst much fanfare and dancing, traditional rites and exchange of gifts, the fifty-two-year old Angu Matamo finally took home his bride, the sixth in his line up. While the groom and bride had been feasting with their families and friends, Angu’s first wife had been preparing her husband’s hut for the new wife – the white cloth now lay on the bed. Angu took Fatti into his hut and closed the door. Outside, the crowd danced and waited. The bride’s parents waited eagerly, for it had to be one of two things: they were either going to be hailed or shamed.

When Angu stepped out of his hut some time later, his first wife stepped inside. She ran her hand affectionately through Fatti’s hair and then pushed her to the side of the mattress. She pulled out the

white cloth and took it outside. At the sight of the bloodstains, the crowd danced in ecstasy. Another girl had become a woman. Another 'womb door' had been thrust open. Another virgin had lost her virginity, the honour to her husband.

Not just a young bride but the youngest wife, Fatti was sent to live with her husband's first wife for some time, time during which she was to learn some basics about her husband. Aged 13 and forty-three, they could have been granddaughter and grandmother, but the most important factor the two women had in common was that they slept beneath the same man. It was the role of the first wife to satisfy her husband by teaching the next one how to give the best of her womanhood to their common man. That woman, in turn, was expected to go to the first wife in the event of any conflict or disagreement with their husband, not back to her family. Nchumuluh tradition said, 'Married to a man, married to his family and his other wives'. Added to what her mother had taught her, Fatti's chaperon gave her lessons on how to deal with her in-laws and how to appease her husband, their husband.

Angu had barely started getting used to having a young, firm body in his bed when Fatti fell seriously ill. Considered a portent for a new bride to fall so ill so soon, she was returned to her parents just two weeks after she had bid them farewell. Tradition held that if a bride missed her new home, she would recover fast in order to return to her man. This was exactly what happened to Fatti. Two days after returning to her father's compound, the fever and stomach ache which had resisted herbal tonics for one week suddenly subsided. Two days later, she was again on the way to her husband's compound. That second trip was however not the last, for she again took ill almost immediately and was again returned to her father's compound. This pattern went on for three weeks.

'Temkeu, how are you?' Angu asked one evening as he sat on a stool opposite his father-in-law's in the latter's compound. A half-filled jug of palm wine sat between them. Two of Angu's uncles sat around them.

'Come good, Angu. Come good, my fathers. Tamu, where are you? Go and bring some of that corn beer for our in-laws. It is very fresh and nice. You are going to like it.'

'We thank you very much, but do not go to such trouble. Our visit will be very brief. We just have something short to say.' Angu's eldest uncle cleared his throat. 'You know what a half-filled jug of palm wine signifies. From what we have witnessed and from what the eye of the gods has seen, Fatti does not want to stay in this marriage with our son. You have seen for yourself that each time she returns to her husband's compound she falls sick; but when she comes back here she gets well the very day. You are our son's friend and you know that he kept his part of the bargain by marrying your daughter. However, at this point there is nothing more he can do to make the marriage work. That is why we have come to tell you to come and collect your daughter, and as customs states, to return all the things our son has given you and your family during these past two years.'

We have added up all and arrived at a total of two hundred thousand Francs.'

The air filled with nothing but the sound of their breathing, Angu's uncles, effortless, Temkeu's, laboured. After several minutes, Temkeu lifted his head and opened his mouth: 'It is a good thing that you people have come so that we put our heads together to discuss this matter. I cannot refuse that something is wrong with the marriage, but you also know that I do not have the kind of money you are demanding. And our custom says that if a girl's family cannot repay the bride price, the former in-laws have to wait until another man comes to ask for the girl's hand. So I will come and take my daughter but as for your bride price, you have to wait and hope that some man would be able and ready to put such heavy money on a woman's head.' Temkeu bowed his head.

Angu was about to say something when one of his uncles shushed him to silence. They walked out without another word. Temkeu lifted his head only when he heard their footsteps fade in the distance. 'A child who stays in marriage and bears many children brings smiles to her parents. A child who cannot afford to stay long enough to conceive is the source of shame to her entire family. First, it had been Fatti's return to life. Then, there had been Makam's funeral without a body. Now it is Fatti taking the path of taboo on which no other Nchumuluh woman has ever walked. What shame! What disgrace! How could flesh of my flesh run to marriage in the morning only to crawl back home in the night? Had Mefo been right in opposing the marriage? Did age really have more wisdom than sex? Was I wrong in ignoring Mefo's title?'

The news that Angu had thrown his manhood met Mefo as she returned from the farm that evening. She threw aside the bag of cocoyams she had been carrying on her head and carried her head instead. When her head became too heavy for her hands, she reversed the roles by using her head as prop for her hands. Her hands resting on her head, her fingers imprisoned in each other, in that grief-stricken posture she continued the long walk home.

When Mefo arrived at the compound, she walked straight into Nkem's hut, took Fatti by the hand, pulled her to her hut and closed the door behind them. Mefo sat down on a stool near the fireside and ushered Fatti to the stool opposite.

Silence.

'Men are not like us, women,' Mefo began but stopped to stare at the ashes on the floor of the dead hearth. 'When the flame is hot and burning, we do not see the ashes. But when the fire dies down, the ashes are there to remind us that there had once been a flame.'

'I do not understand, Mefo.'

After another prolonged period of silence, Mefo lifted her head and looked Fatti straight in the eyes. 'You need a lot of "big sense" when you deal with men. You are just a child and Angu is an old, decaying man. I will tell you one thing and I will say it just one time, but if you open your ears well you will remember it long after I have gone.'

Silence.

Finally, Mefo began to speak. 'I have seen bad days. I have tasted bad days, but I never thought I would live to see the day blood of my blood would see and taste so much disgrace.' She paused. 'The last time I felt like this, like a trap that cannot catch any meat, was a long, long time ago.'

'I was a beautiful and hard working young girl,' Mefo continued, 'who had only one dream: to marry a nice man and have a large family. Even at this age, on this day, more than fifty years later, I still

curse the day my father called me into his hut to tell me that the ancestors had come to him in a dream and revealed that I had been chosen, among the *Fon*'s female relatives, as next in line to be Mefo. Me, a Mefo? Why me? From one day to the next, I moved from being an innocent young girl to one destined to inherit a title.

'My father had twelve girls, just as Temkeu now has twelve boys. He always told everyone in the compound that if they chose any of his girls as Mefo, he would not give her to any man, even the *Fon*. So that dream revealing that I had been chosen as the next Mefo meant that I had to bury the only dream I had.' Mefo shook her head. 'I could do many things for my father, but I could not bury my dream of having a family. I decided to create life within me with the first man who came – that was the second man in my life; the first one threw his manhood.'

Mefo pause but resumed talking almost immediately as though afraid she would actually suffocate if she were silent for too long. 'I had seen my father angry but never so angry that he decided to seize his name from me.'

Fatti contented herself to listen, for she had long concluded that Mefo was talking not to her alone but to two people: Fatti and Mefo. 'My father gave me back his name only after elderly members of the family sounded their heavy voices. I could put a knife in my father's heart by having a child, but I could not make the ancestors change their mind. Once chosen as a Mefo, always a Mefo. The ancestors never changed their minds.'

'Nobody likes to live with a disgraced daughter who has a child without the respect of a wife. That is what made my father to soften his heart and accept that he would offer his Mefo to a man. The marriage would take place only after I gave birth – that was the condition to which he tied the decision. But his wisdom came out in the open nine months later, when I gave birth to a boy. Yes, he claimed that he did not want his grandson to grow out of his compound, yet everyone knew that giving back the kola nuts he had not even eaten was his way of punishing me. He wanted me to remain in his compound and raise his grandson.'

'People say that my heart is hard like stone, but I am sure that

they would have done the same if they had to live my life. Who can blame me for not wanting to see my first and only child? And my father named him Fopou – he had finally found someone to carry on his name, the name his twelve girls were going to throw away through marriage.

‘The most important men in my life walked on my head: my father and then my son’s father, who had not fought to marry me. Would my first suitor have been any different? I am not sure. Some men even came to ask for my hand after I gave birth. That was their way of lowering me, the former beauty queen. Every man in the village knew about my father’s decision to keep me in his compound, and again my breasts had already become like overripe mangoes – men have shown that they do not accept overripe mangoes when they can have unripe pears.

‘Men! Women live to clean, cook and make successors and bride price-fetchers for them. Yet the same year the women go to the ancestors, they buy firewood and palm oil for another woman’s parents. Men! They say they are on top, but they forget that they can never grow without women. There are so many reasons why I never wanted any woman with my blood to walk with men.

‘As Temkeu grew up and started collecting women and making children, I drank corn beer and smoked my pipe each time another baby boy cried. Three wives and eight sons, I knew that luck would not always be on my side. Finally, the day came when I heard Fatti’s cry. From that day, I knew that no matter how hard I tried to keep her under my wings, the day would come when the miseries of my youth would leave the night and come back to the light.

‘Fatti’s death brought tears to my heart – sorrow that such a young life should fade so fast. Yet when I thought of what men planned when they saw her, I welcomed the ancestors’ decision to call her home.’

Fatti coughed uncomfortably as if to remind Mefo that she was present.

Mefo carried on her monologue. ‘As my only granddaughter, it had been a great gift to hold her again in my arms. That day I stood over Temkeu’s bed and watched her lying there weak and powerless,

that day was the day I decided to protect her with the very air that I breathe. That is why I invited her to sleep in my bed; and each day I called on the ancestors to help me to protect her. I told them that I prefer to die rather than live to see men overtake my efforts.

‘Being a Mefo has brought many disappointments, but it also brought much respect and one big advantage: the power to choose my own successor. My mother died without choosing a successor – that is why the ancestors had to visit my father in a dream. With Fatti as my chosen successor, I could always argue that I did not want her to marry. That was my plan until the day Temkeu openly challenged my authority by insisting that she was going to marry Angu Matamo. Never had I felt so powerless.

‘Temkeu, a child who hates breast milk but only when he no longer needs it! After two difficult years of hating his voice and dreading the day they would paint my Fatti with camwood, I now have to face life with the knowledge that Fatti has tasted disgrace. With such a taboo on her forehead, she is not good enough to be a Mefo. The elders will never accept it! A Mefo is an admired Queen Mother, not a disgraced girl looking for another road in life.’

Another spell of silence fell upon the hut. It lasted five minutes.

‘The pot inside which food is cooked always remains behind the fireside. It never goes to the eating place.’

Silence.

‘Men always leave the black pot and go and eat inside a clean plate. So when you walk with men, you need to open your eyes. They will use you to cook, but the very men will refuse to eat from you because you are too dirty. So watch out when you walk with men. Do you hear me?’ Mefo pulled her right to give emphasis to her words.

‘Yes, Mefo, I hear you.’

‘When a man bites his tongue he cannot spit out all the blood. He must swallow some.’ Mefo bowed her head and fixed her eyes on the ashes.

‘What did you say, Mefo?’

‘That one is not for you. You can go now.’

Fatti started walking out but just as she was about to step past the door, she turned to Mefo and said, ‘But Mefo, your father sent you

medicine which cured that headache which had been worrying you for a long time. Maybe—'

'Do not get into those things, my child. You cannot understand. Go now.'

Fatti closed the door behind her.

'The river followed a winding course because there was no one to guide it.' Mefo said to the closed door. 'If all I can do to help Fatti is spill a few words, then I think it is time for me to go back to my ancestors. If I failed to make my life what I wanted it to be and cannot protect Fatti from the lashes of men, then it is truly time for me to go.'

'Temkeu, you have won. You have brought all of us down with you. Tradition has always been on the side of men. Why did I decide to fight with a man when I knew that I could never win? Temkeu, you have won.'

Those who knew Temkeu during all his years in Nchumuluh certainly found it difficult to dig out the familiar in the head of the Popou family. As the days became weeks, months and a year, he faded along with them, Fatti's disgrace visibly usurping his senses. He had lost many habits but not that of speaking to his ancestors. He now spoke to them even in their absence. 'My friend has pushed out my daughter – I have accepted. But from where will I get two hundred thousand Francs? To have such money, I would have to sleep in my workshop for five years. It will take five years to make goods that I can sell to get such money. It means that my sons will not go to school for five years, and my family will not eat well for five years, and I will buy nothing for my wives, children and myself for five years?'

'I tried to calculate the cost of the goods that came to my family with Angu's name on them, and I have realised that Angu and his family decided to take palm wine for white man wine and a goat for a cow. What could have prompted them to behave like traders? An argument that time had added value to the goods to make them

worth four times their initial cost? Where is the Angu whom I knew, the Angu with whom I shared kola nuts and got drunk over palm wine at The People's Club? And how could the elders have agreed to such open cheating? Why has the wisdom of my people let me down? Why? And what is a Nchumuluh man without the support of his tribesmen? What else would I do if I can no longer afford to be a part of The People's Club? If they could afford to fool me into selling my Fatti and then put a knife in my heart just when I needed them, who knows what they would do next? If I cannot trust even Pouafo, then there is really no place for me at The People's Club.

‘And Fatti! I cry in my heart as I watch her carry her pain about as she moves from one duty to another. Each morning I follow her as she leaves the compound with both hands down and returns, some minutes later, with both hands supporting the bucket of water on her head. I follow her to the stream and watch her soak and soap, pound and scrub, rinse and dry. I follow her even when I know she knows I am walking on her footprints. Oh, Temkeu, look at what you have become.

Just after she cut fourteen branches from her tree, two men knocked on my door to ask for her hand. With sugar in their mouth and respect on their shoulders, they told stories of how they would take care of her and how she would swim in the best cloths, bush meat, and all that her hands and eyes wanted. Yet once I told them about the conditions of bride price, they ran like a squirrel running from a trap. With women plenty and fresh like corn on the farm in the rainy season, no man in Nchumuluh, rich or poor, old or young, will give up such a significant amount of money just to add to his collection of women. I refuse to even think about those young men who have been saving just to start a collection.

‘I would never have thought that one day I would be thinking this, but I would be a fool to keep on denying it. It is over for Fatti, my Fatti. All I can do now is to make her comfortable in her father's house. I will make a new bed and place it in Mefo's hut. If she cannot sleep behind a man, she can at least stop sleeping behind Mefo.

‘Mefo! How I long for those harsh words and open challenges! How I long for those fights which keep the neighbours awake! How I

long for you to come and make me feel like a prisoner within my own bricks! Longings that may never be satisfied, for all I get these days is silence, silence and stares that make me look away. She gives me cold, hostile stares that make me look anywhere but into her black eyes. Mefo, you have won.'

With the village square decidedly out of bounds and his compound full of wordless women, Temkeu spent most of his time locked up in his workshop. He left his compound before the occupants woke and crept in when they had settled in their various huts for the night. He was roving idly about his workshop, one afternoon, when he suddenly skipped to the door, fastened the lock, and headed down the main road, striding as he had not done since the annulment of Fatti's marriage.

'I know that you are very surprised to see me, Father,' Temkeu said when Fr. Max opened the presbytery door.

'A very big surprise, Pa Fopou, but a happy one. Come inside.'

'Father, I was just passing. I do not want to disturb you.' He brandished a smile.

'I cannot be honoured by the visit of an important person like you and then let you go without inviting you inside. Do you people not say that, "the man who has seen the inside of the house must enter?" Come inside, Pa Fopou.' Fr. Max had retreated into the living room and was indicating a chair for Temkeu, who was still lingering at the door and who had just taken off his twine cap and folded it in his fist. 'I was drinking some beer. Let me bring your own glass.'

Finally, both men were sitting side by side on two of the five cane chairs in the sitting room. Temkeu picked up his glass and examined it for a while, and then emptied its content in a single gulp. As though counting every move, he placed the glass on the table, leaned into the cushioned chair and started tapping his fingers on his lap. Abruptly, he sat up and looked directly into Fr. Max's eyes. 'Our people say that when a man urinates in his drinking water, he has no choice but to drink that water.'

'What are you referring to?' Fr. Max asked.

'Many things.'

That was the first time he had set eyes on Fr. Max since that day,

more than two years ago, when he had charged into the Church premises and accused him of Makam's death. It had been more than two years since he had forbidden Nkem and Fatti from stepping foot in church. As he sat there, he wondered what they would say if they knew where he was at that precise moment. More so, what were his former club mates going to think if they knew he was drinking 'white man beer' with the white man.

After the events of the past year, he had concluded that he surely did not know all the answers. He was no longer sure if the man, as head of the compound, should always have the last word, as tradition said. He also wondered if he was wrong in refusing to explore the 'white man's traditional beliefs' as he often put it.

'Tell me about your God, Fr. Max.' Temkeu slowly said.

'Pa Fopou, talk about my God is big like my God himself. If we just start talking like that, we would still be talking and talking after many weeks. We will arrange a program for that. But I am sure that if you have come to see me today, it is because something is troubling you.'

'I hear that in your church you say that people should not offer sacrifices to the ancestors?'

'God sent his only child to come and wash away our sins. God sacrificed his own Child. How can we compare the blood of God's Child with that of animals? Jesus Christ, the Child of God, listens to our prayers and then carries them to His Father. Since we already have Jesus Christ who transfers our prayers to God, we no longer need ancestors.'

'Father,' Temkeu burst in, 'we believed in higher power even before you came with your religion. All you did was call the power a different name, represent it in a different way and tell a different story about it. Do not make as if you know more about divine beings than me. I asked you to tell me about your belief, not that you should put my own under your feet. We are just two people looking for some mighty power to help us make our lives easier and significant. Maybe we would both even get to the land of the ancestors to realise that my belief has bigger eyes and ears than your own. So all I ask is that you tell me about your God.' Before Fr. Maxworth could reply, Temkeu

rapidly asked another question: 'You say that we should not marry many women?'

'Many women take much of your time such that you do not have time for God. Again, many women bring many problems and expenses, and many children, who require much attention and other things they may never get. One woman and one man – that is the nice way, just as God wants it.'

'You say that your brothers did not kill my Makam?'

'I do not know who killed your Makam, but I know that your brother—

'My cousin'

'—yes, your cousin who was killed during the Second World War gave his life to bring peace to the world. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, gave his life to wash away the sins of mankind. They killed Him but God brought Him back to life after three days. God will reward your cousin for his bravery and sacrifice. That is all I can tell you on that issue.'

'Okay, I have heard enough for one day. I will come back another day so that you tell me more of that story about your God. Let me be going.' Temkeu picked up his cap from the chair and stood up.

'I am very happy with your visit. See you very soon, Pa Fopou.'

That evening Temkeu assembled his wives and children in his hut and shut the door. Though he spoke to the crowd, he paid attention to Nkem and Fatti. 'The white man came to our land,' he began. 'He brought his God with him, and he made much noise about his God, saying that his God is a very great God who made heaven and earth and who is the father of all gods. The white man told us that even though we call all the same way, there is a big difference between our gods and his God. Mosa, you are the one who is in the white man's school. Tell us that difference.'

'The white man's God starts with big "G" and the other one with small "g". The white man does not say that his God is the father of all gods. He says that his God is the only God; and that is why we need to keep away from all other gods and worship only the true and ever living God.'

'Shut up your mouth, you idiot! I ask you one question and you

answer two? You think that because you have gone to the white man's school you can talk to me as you want? So I pay your school fees for you to go and learn big book and then come and talk to me without respect?'

'I am sorry, Papa,' Mosa said with a bow.

When Temkeu regained his composure, he continued: 'You people who go to church – I do not know what you think about this matter, but I have called all of you here to say something very important. All of you should listen very well because I do not want any quarrelling when I am gone. I say this: No matter what you think or do not think about our gods and the white man's God, my successor, whomever I will choose, should keep my skull and perform all the necessary sacrifices to it. Has that entered every person's head?'

'Yes, Papa' 'Yes, *Mbeh*,' they murmured.

'I cannot and will never ask you to put aside our tradition. Our ancestors existed long before the white man came with his God, and even today, when the white man has planted his God in our land, our ancestors are still present and fill us with their blessings and wisdom. Am I talking sense?'

'Yes, Papa' 'Yes, *Mbeh*'

'The white man came with his God. He brought his God and he brought his school. School is something good for our village – no, I take that back.' Temkeu cleared his throat and began all over: 'The white man brought his school and told us that such good flows from his God. Our gods do us good and the white man God does us good. All what I can say on this matter is that each one of you should look for a way of balancing both beliefs. Consult both for each need, divide the work between them or ignore both at times. Attribute thanks to whichever you want or to neither. Just do it in your own way.'

The window had been open and the cold wind had been blowing in through it, but for the first time that evening, the whistling of the wind was audible, very audible.

'The white man says that his God raised Jesus, Jesus what? Totso, what is that his family name again?'

‘Christ. His name is Jesus Christ.’

‘Yes, the white man says that his God raised Jesus Christ, as they call him, to life. Our gods, through our ancestors, sent Fatti back to life. Each person should interpret it as he wants. For my part, I tell you that you should take the two beliefs and join them into one. Is that clear?’

‘Yes’

‘I repeat again that I do not want any quarrelling when I am gone. I do not want the *juju* and the choir to sing at my funeral. I do not want Tchafo and Fr. Max to fight over my corpse. Bury me like a Nchumuluh man, and let my successor recover my skull. But as I have said, take the two beliefs and merge them into one.’

Totso stayed back as the others walked out. ‘Papa, Uncle Pouafo gave me this letter to give you. He said that it fell out of a passing car this afternoon.’

‘Read it out.’

‘So many people talk of reunions, but so few narrow their talk down to family reunions. It is often class, village or professional reunion. People look for the least reason to unite; yet the standard human unit is often the last on their minds. I don’t know what people have in mind when they talk about blessed men, but I know I am a blessed man. The Bible says that God looked at the woman who had no child, who was being mocked by other women, and He decided to give her a child. To my wife and me, God did not give just one child but a houseful of children. He did not just give us children, but He also gave us food to feed them and means to educate them.’ Mr. Ngalemo paused and looked around the room at the anxious faces looking at him.

‘I don’t know how others describe a happy man, but I know that I am a happy man. I am a standing definition of the word “happy”.’ He smiled briefly and then continued, ‘Mathew, Christina, Felix – whenever I go back to the village, I am not ashamed to look directly into the eyes of any of your parents. When I meet my ancestors in the other world, I will hold my head high because I will be able to stand in front of John’s late father and tell him that I did not leave his son as I met him. And you my daughter Angela – whenever I go to the village your mother carries the little food she has and rushes to greet me. Indeed, it is with pleasure that I have raised children like you. It is wonderful to have had the opportunity, together with my wife, to play the role of parents to wonderful children like you. Forgive me for calling you children, but despite your ages and the fact that most of you now have children of your own, you will always remain children to me, my children.’

Mr. Ngalemo turned and looked at his wife who was sitting to his left. ‘I don’t know what others have in mind when they say they have good wives, but I know what it means to be the husband of a good wife. As you heard during the thanksgiving service, this is not just about thanking God for the gift of life and of children, but also of a special woman who has always stood by my side.’

He lifted his head back towards the crowd. 'When we part today and all of you return to your husbands, wives and children, I want you to always remember that God is all. Without God, nothing is possible on this earth. Trust in Him always and all will be well.'

Deafening applause accompanied Mr. Ngalemo as he walked to join his wife on the sofa. His speech was followed by some words of gratitude from some of his five adopted children. The speeches over, the gathering of thirty or so people broke up into small groups of two and more who filled the air with small talk:

'Angela, I have not seen you in ages ...'

'I don't agree with what Pastor Arrey said during the sermon ...'

'John, where is your wife ...'

As they talked their eyes darted to and from the dining table. Mr. Ngalemo had led the talking. Mrs. Ngalemo led the guests to the dining table. Taking the cue, they filed to the table with empty hands and returned with plates heaped with various combinations of the food: *fufu* corn and *njama-njama*, *achu* and yellow soup, *eru* and *waterfufu*, *koki* and plantains, rice and sauce. As they took to levelling the mountains in their hands, the former inhabitants of the Ngalemo house complimented and teased.

'Mama, you are the best cook. Each time I eat your food I almost regret leaving this house.'

'Angela, you know every child says her mother is the best cook. And if not for marriage, would I have had a namesake? By the way, how is my Patience?'

'Oh, your namesake is doing fine, Mama.'

'I should wrap a small package for you to take to her. I know she will share with her sister and brother.'

'You are always so kind and thoughtful, Mama.'

'Though Mama calls you Angela, I know your name.'

'Please, Felix, would you stop that childish talk? We are now adults.'

'What harm is there in reawakening childhood memories? When did we last meet? Five years? four? Just move around and you will talk with people you have not seen in ages.'

'On that count I agree with you. Who could have thought we

would come this far? Look at me today. There is very little of that girl who first came to Yaoundé at eleven'

'Yes, who could have imagined that the stubborn little girl would grow up to be a successful nurse?'

'Head of the Paediatric Department.' Angela raised her shoulders.

'Wife of a University lecturer.'

'Mother of three.'

'And all these achievements before thirty-five! Hey, are you sure you are not yet forty?' Felix joked.

'Don't tell me you are jealous of me?'

'I cannot be jealous of you. You are my younger sister, and don't forget that I know your name.'

'Would you forget about that for a while?' A slight crease formed on Angela's smooth brow.

'Forgetting about it does not mean I will forget your name, Prejudice. Remember, we are at a family reunion, meaning childhood memories have their place in our midst. I know your name and your name is Prejudice. If you don't like it then prove to me that your name has really changed.' With that Felix bent his head and concentrated on his plate.

Embarrassed, Angela did not dare look up. The now-alert crowd stepped in and filled the silence: 'Hey, I had forgotten about that name. I hope you have changed, Prejudice.'

'Do you people remember when Polyandrew came to ask for Prejudice's hand?'

'Who can forget that incident when she almost brought shame on the entire family? She burst into tears when Daddy kept questioning her suitor.'

'You were not even present in the sitting room. I was there and prayed to sink into my seat.'

'But you all know what? In hindsight, Prejudice had reason to cry for her Polyandrew. Don't you agree with me that they form a wonderful match, just like a lazy student and a libidinal lecturer?'

'Hey, watch out with such analogies. Someone will think you are implying that of Angela's husband.'

Angela's head remained in her plate throughout the teasing

episode. She was thankful for that off remark, which precipitated the end of the conversation. Responding to sudden pressure from someone pulling her hand, she lifted her head and looked into her surrogate mother's eyes. She followed her to the kitchen where they joined hands to perform a task that could easily have been done by one child.

As the sun bowed out for the moon and starry sky, the manner of festivity changed to suit the disappearance of daylight. The parents had orchestrated the church service and family lunch. The children now set the stage to feast in a manner worthy of their generation. Drinks flowed in abundance – beer and soft drinks for the crowd, whisky, wine and champagne for the VIPs. Chatting excitedly, the guests sipped and guzzled and thrust forward glasses smudged with lipstick and fingerprints for refills. *Makossa* and *Bikutsi*– the music blasted out of the loudspeaker to the taste of the DJ and obvious satisfaction of those twisting and twirling in the makeshift dance hall. After a steamy round of *Zouk*, the speakers suddenly died down.

‘DJ more music,’ the partying crowd hollered.

When the DJ did not respond, at least not as they had expected, they sighed all the way to their seats, making way for Angela and her siblings and their reluctant mother. ‘Mama, Mama ehh ehh ...’ As the popular tune swept the airwaves, the Ngalemo children, gyrating on the dance floor, gave a rendition to their euphoric mother who did more smiling than dancing.

‘Preju, Preju,’ Felix called after Angela, who tried to ignore him to no avail. ‘Preju, I want to join you on the floor. So far I have been enjoying others enjoy themselves, but now that there is whisky in my blood and sleep in my eyes, I need to dance both out.’

‘Dance out your drunkenness if it would help you. I have no time for drunkards.’

Angela turned away and bumped into one of her brothers. ‘One of your friends is looking for you outside,’ he told her.

‘Who?’

‘Agatha.’

‘I thought lateness did not have a place in your life? That punctuality was your catchword?’ Angela inquired once she stood

face to face with Agatha.

'You know I was not around. I was in Belgium and just returned on Tuesday and before going to Belgium I had spent two weeks in the United Kingdom.'

'Today is Saturday, isn't it?'

'Yes, of course.'

'I just wanted to be sure because at times I get confused.'

Agatha Tefu stood out in the crowd. Her mini dress was made of more expensive fabric than those of the other women around. Her afro glittered and the heels of her shoes were higher. She had been the mistress of a white government official, one who, at the end of his mission, left her his car and enough money to set her above most of her compatriots.

'Have you had something to eat?' Angela asked.

'I just arrived. How could I have eaten already?'

'Go to the table and serve yourself, but don't eat too much. Remember, there is a big wedding in church tomorrow.'

'Bonsoir, Angela.'

'Bonsoir, Michelle.'

After picking a quarrel with the neighbour who had also turned up late, Angela ushered in the two latecomers. The last person, other than her family member, that Angela saw that night was Agatha, given that she gave Polyandrew and her a ride home. The first person Angela saw in the morning was still Agatha, who came knocking just as Polyandrew was taking off for his customary Sunday morning walk.

'Sister Angela, can you believe that by the time I got home yesterday my housemaid had absconded? What am I going to do all by myself? You know how I hate cleaning and cooking. I don't even want to think of washing and ironing.'

'Considering the manner in which you treated her, I am not surprised. Remember, I had warned you that the day was to come when you will honk and be the one to step out and open your gate?'

'Was I supposed to treat her like a queen? I hired her to work for me and I paid for her services, not even counting other benefits like lodging, feeding and clothing.'

‘You may have given her all, but you treated her like an accountable adult. She was just a child.’

‘She was a paid worker.’

‘That is it! To you it was all about work and work.’

‘You can speak now because you have not had the experience of dealing with maids. I tell you that when you give them a smile, the next thing they want is a giggle. Therefore, the best way to deal with them is not to give them any liberties at all. But are you not the one who talked about getting a maid now that your husband’s niece has moved into her own apartment?’

‘Yes, I sure need some help around here. Instead of getting a housemaid whom I will have to pay, I have decided to go and take my niece from the village. At least, it would not be the same as having a stranger under my roof; and our interactions would be set from a different platform.’

‘Lucky you! Has her mother accepted?’

‘She cannot refuse for the child is just loafing about? The girl is fourteen. She—’

‘Yes. That is a good age for a maid. Younger ones have neither the energy nor aptitude to carry out their duties efficiently. Older ones – there is nothing you have eaten which they have not. They turn to compare with you and, in the end, ignore your orders. Some even compete for your man’s attention.’

‘Please keep those dirty ideas to yourself.’

‘Okay, as you wish. Don’t say I did not warn you. I’m speaking from experience. Can your girl read and write? Things would not be that easy if she cannot. Take for instance, a market list. How do you send a child to do weekly shopping when all she has is money and a meaningless piece of paper?’

‘You are right, but you know parents in the village simply pray that their daughters grow up fast so they send them into marriage? Hers is a very peculiar case. I hear she was married but, for some reason, could not stay in her husband’s house. She is now back at her parent’s, and what’s the best part? They, or any prospective suitor, have to repay the bride price of two hundred thousand Francs.’

‘You’re kidding!’

‘Oh, no! That is her pitiable story. I hear several men have come to ask for her hand but none can afford or is willing to part with that sum. So you see; I would be doing both my sister and the child a favour by getting her out of that place which no longer holds any future for her.’

‘And what does your husband think?’

‘He knows we need some help in this house. Besides, his niece has benefited from us; now is the turn of my relative.’

‘How soon would she be here?’

‘I have sent a letter to my sister and her husband informing them of my intention.’

‘Please tell your sister to look for a child for me. A child of fourteen would suit me very well. Make all the necessary arrangements, and I will reimburse whatever expenses you incur. Let me hurry back home and prepare for service. See you in church.’

While Angela Niba was still waiting for the reply to her letter, one arrived for her. The message was brief: Mefo had died four days ago.

To a person born into shoes, they will be a number of leather straps attached to a flat rubber sole; yet to Fatti they were the best thing she had ever held – the way she pampered and revered them said as much. In fact, she had not taken her eyes off the pair of green, flat-sole sandals for three full minutes. Her stepmothers wanted to see what they did to her feet, but Fatti appeared to be waiting for someone special to come and slip on her shoes. That person was certainly not Mosa, who tugged at her ribs and taunted her as being primitive.

To flee from the increasing pressure, Fatti dashed out of Achile's hut in search of her mother. 'Mama, Mama,' she exclaimed when she found her behind the compound. 'Mama, look at the shoes which Aunty Angela brought for me.'

'Your aunt likes you a lot.' Nkem seized the sandals from Fatti's hand. Turning them left and right, up and down, she admired them with undivided attention. 'Have you tried them? Come and let us go to Achile's hut so that you try them for all of us to admire.'

Lips creased like wrinkled skin, brow a bed of furrows and ridges, Fatti trudged behind her mother back to Achile's hut.

'Fatti, come and try your shoes let me see. I thought of buying a bigger size but then hesitated. I hope it fits you.' Angela Niba, who had just walked into the hut, joined the chorus of those calling on Fatti to soil her newest possession.

'Come and sit here.' Mosa got up and readily offered his stool. 'Let me help you.' Even before she had settled properly into the seat, he lifted her right leg, pulled a sandal from her hand and brought both together. 'Hm! This looks nice!' He placed the clad foot on the ground and picked up the other one.

While he imprisoned her left foot in the sandal, Fatti tossed the right this way and that. To the onlookers it was surely about admiring the beauty of the marriage; yet it went far beyond that. 'My toes cannot breath. I cannot even walk.' The two steps she had just taken indeed seemed like those of a toddler learning to trust her feet.

‘Don’t worry; you are going to get used to them,’ her aunt reassured.

As soon as the attention shifted from her, Fatti sat down and quickly loosened the straps around her ankles. She ran to the stream and washed off every speck of dust from the soles. Still running, she headed to a nearby farm and dangled her gift in front of her friends’ eyes. The demand here was the same: ‘We want to see them on your feet and not in the air.’

Now aware that shoes were meant to pick up dirt in place of her feet, curbing her excitement was the next challenge in Fatti’s shoe-discovery process. When no one was paying attention to her, she would dive into Mefo’s hut, pull out the pair of green sandals from her bag and try them. The shoes had not come unaccompanied. There was a dress and the black traveling bag which now held her few personal belongings, all but the most precious one – the magazine. She had offered it to a stunned Mosa.

With the fall of night, Fatti forgot about the shoes as other matters took possession of her mind. Though she went to bed early, she had very little sleep that night.

Mefo had died. Mefo had gone, abandoning her with the clueless mystery of Saha Tpulse. Mefo did not want her as a successor – that was okay. But why had she not named a successor. To the village that meant she did not want to be remembered in this world. It was just eight days since Mefo’s death, seven days since her burial and six days of living in her hut without her, yet it seemed like a year. There was never going to be another day like the day of Mefo’s death.

It is two o’clock in the afternoon. Fatti returns early from the farm because she could not shrug off the premonition that something terrible was going to happen. By the time she arrives at the compound, Mefo is already there. Mefo set out for the farm before her and Mefo returns from the farm before her. That is not normal. Inside the hut, she finds Mefo lying on the bed, looking up at her as though she is transparent. Mefo never lies down in the afternoon.

Since there is no adult in the compound, Fatti dashes out to the neighbouring compound. She runs to three different compounds before she succeeds in finding an adult. Suum’s mother takes one

look at Mefo and immediately dispatches Fatti to go and get her parents. Transfixed, Fatti sends Tamu. Achile is the first to arrive. When Temkeu gets home, he takes stock of the situation and then walks away, leaving his three wives and Suum's mother to do their thing. The women send Fatti out but she ignores them. Concentrated on preparing Mefo's body for burial, they soon forget she is present.

They close Mefo's eyes, tie a piece of cloth over it and knot it at the back of her head. That is to keep her eyelids shut. They tie another piece of cloth under her chin and knotted it over her head. That is to keep her mouth closed. They flex her muscles and major joints to keep them pliant. Fatti cries. They are twisting her Mefo as though she has become a wet dress from which they are trying to wring out water. The ordeal is far from over. Next, the women take Mefo's torch and remove the batteries. They crush the two batteries, pour the content into a bucket, mix it with some water and then insert the mixture into Mefo's anus using a stomach pump. They women whisper that the mixture will slow down the decaying. To keep the concoction inside, they hold her buttocks together for some time. After a while, they lay Mefo on a mat on the floor to keep her body temperature down. They clean her and dress her in her best cloth, tying it over her breasts. They untie the bands from her head and wear her a headscarf. Finally, they adorn her wrists, ankles and neck with beads, those she usually wears when she goes to the palace. She is beautiful.

The four women smile, and then they start shouting and wailing and twirling. Soon the compound is full. Soon Temkeu returns from his workshop with a coffin. Mefo will never again sleep on her bed. That night she was to sleep in the coffin; the following night, inside the earth in front of her hut. Her body had been prepared for burial like any other body. But being a Mefo, she was to receive a special burial by elders of the village.

Fatti got up from the bed, Mefo's bed, and went to the slab for a drink of water. Mefo had died and Aunt Angela was born, Aunt Angela who had arrived a few days ago with news that she wanted to take her to Yaoundé. She had never known Aunt Angela until four days ago, and now she was to go and live with her and in a strange

place?

The city! For sometime many of her friends and peers had been moving to the cities to live with and work for total strangers. The stories which they brought back during rare holidays or when they ran back to the village were far from pleasing. Was her case going to be different? Obviously, since Aunt Angela was not a stranger but her aunt. And did she really have a choice? All dreams of becoming a wife had been buried; suitors no longer even looked her way. Maybe Aunt Angela was a godsend. Maybe the move to Yaoundé was going to be the means to fulfilling the only other dream she had – that of going to school. Indeed, perhaps that was the reason why Aunt Angela wanted to take her to Yaoundé. Fatti smiled, grateful for giving her an aunt who lived in the city.

But what was the place going to be like? Was she always going to put on nice clothes like the one Aunt Angela had brought for her to wear for the journey the following day? Would she be allowed to continue going to church? She was surely going to miss her brothers, but was she going to be able to make new friends? The questions were too many; and since the only thing that could control her excitement was the answers, she decided to just get used to being excited until the excitement disappeared of its own accord.

When Fatti finally drifted off to sleep, it was to dream of new shoes and strange cities, of schools exclusive to girls and of boys confined to farms. She narrated the dream over and over, her greeting to anybody who crossed her path the following morning. ‘What can it feel like to be a boy? Who can give me five minutes in the shoes of a boy?’ she asked after the fifth and last narration.

Fatti Ashi had often seen cars pass by the main road to and from the Mene Motor Park, where people boarded cars to Bamenda via Santa or to Bafoussam and beyond via Kombou. Yet sitting within the confines of the moving metal box was something she, like most Nchumuluhans, had experienced only in their dreams. At the village square, she exclaimed excitedly as another impact of Aunt Angela’s decision hit home, ‘Mosa, I cannot believe that I will enter a car!’

The Peugeot 403 meant for five passengers, including the driver, now had ten people squashed into it: five behind, four in front, and

one fighting for space with the baggage topped over the boot. To accommodate the excess baggage, the cover of the boot had been yanked out. With the luggage mounted past the height of the car, the driver had no view of the rear. The alternative to enable him keep his back in sight did not exist either, as the side and rear-view mirrors were anywhere but attached to the knobs in the places allotted for them. The absence of headlights meant the car could run only when the driver could rely on the sun's light. It was not the power of the gods that kept the road accident-free. It was simply the fact that only three passenger vehicles plied the road. The roster was simple: Each car was king of the road for one weekday; no car took to the road on Tuesdays and Thursdays; all cars could run on weekends and market days depending on the human traffic. The return journey to Yaoundé had initially been planned for Tuesday, but it had been postponed with the information that the next car out of Nchumuluh took off on Wednesday.

Finally on the road, the car jounced, hopping in and out of potholes. Kilometre after kilometre, they left Nchumuluh behind and ventured into green territory, where trees gaped at them from both sides of the road, birds chirped goodbye from treetops and animals hailed from the bush. Soon the car stopped accelerating. The wheels stopped obeying the driver's commands and started obeying the chunks of mud clogging them. Sandwiched between the driver and a huge man, with the gearbox between her legs, Fatti bore the brunt of the driver's rage. He knocked and boxed her inner lap in his frantic fight with the gearbox. The engine revved up and up but the car did not budge. After several vain attempts, the driver gave up and turned off the ignition. Leaving the key in place, he jumped out and asked all passengers to follow suit.

'Women should walk ahead. Men should go behind and push the car.'

Fatti turned towards her aunt and they, together with two other female passengers, used their feet where the car wheels had failed. Behind them, the men pushed and the engine revved up, but the car still did not move.

'Aunty, have we reached?' Fatti asked in an innocent voice.

'No, Fatti, the car has a problem.

'Does that mean that we are going to continue to Yaoundé on foot?'

'You really do not know what you are saying, Fatti. Yaoundé is still a long, long way off. And if that car does not stop being naughty, we would never get to Yaoundé today.'

Fatti turned and looked behind. The car still had not moved an inch despite the efforts of the five men urging it on with their hands. One last futile push on the accelerator and the driver skipped out of his seat. He walked to the boot and started untying the black rubber band holding most of the luggage in place. While some men sat on the grassy sidewalk to recover, others gave the driver a hand. Taking out piece after piece of luggage, they started reducing the weight of the car. Fatti tapped her aunt to indicate what was going on.

'Driver, please wait.' Angela rushed back to the car. 'Please let me put aside my luggage; I have to be in Yaoundé today.'

'Okay, Madam, show me your luggage.'

'This black travelling bag, that box there, that bag of potatoes and the bunch of plantains under there.'

'Okay, you can go ahead. I will not remove them.'

'Push them to one side of the boot.'

'I have told you that I will not take out your luggage.'

'Driver, I understand you, but I just prefer that you sort out my luggage while I am still here.'

'You women think you know too much. Come and do it yourself.'

'Madam, let me help you,' one of the male passengers offered. 'Which is your luggage.'

Angela pointed out her luggage as before. 'Thank you very much, Sir.'

As the man set to work, the driver shouted out to the other passengers: 'Now that the car is refusing to move, I will remove some of the luggage of those going to Bafoussam and Bamenda. If you cannot carry the load with you, I will hide it in the bush and collect it the next time I come pass here.'

The women had been walking for thirty minutes when the car of

exhausted men finally met up with them. After another hour of alternate riding and trekking, the passengers finally arrived at the Mene Motor Park – the main outlet from and inlet to Nchumuluh. Cars arriving and taking off, people rushing to buy tickets and secure comfortable seats, drivers hooting to alert sauntering passengers, street vendors trying to entice commuters with bread, watches, torches, and beauty products – the Mene Motor Park was as active as its reputation was big. After identifying the twelve-seater Hiace bus bound for Yaoundé, Angela asked Fatti to go inside and secure two of the four vacant seats at the tail end of the bus while she went to the counter for the tickets.

Soon they were on the way. __Mbounda, Baffoussam, Banganté, Tonga, Makenene, Bafia, Ombessa – Auntie Angela called out names of towns. Fatti spewed and spewed. Some passengers dozed. Others commented on the poor road infrastructure, regretting that it had drained the blood of so many commuters. The driver changed gears and kept the speedometer needle in clockwise motion, reversing it only as they neared the Sanaga River. Buses queued up on both sides of the road, vendors trying to rouse passengers' appetites by swaying various food items in their faces, bars booming out music in the hope of selling bottles – that was the border of River Sanaga.

'Orange. Baton. Anana. Mandarin. Plantain. L'eau glacé. Sac. Bitter kola.' The vendors, mostly women and children, did not even wait for the bus to stop before starting their marketing assault. They ran behind it, thrusting their goods through the windows and door. Once she succeeded in getting past the crowded door, Fatti turned back and stared at it all with amazement. Afraid of getting lost in the throng, she placed her feet nowhere but on her aunt's shoe prints. They stopped in front of women sitting over grilling plantains and men standing above barbecuing meat. Fatti stretched out her hands and received whatever came her way: roasted plantains, roasted plum, goat meat, a slice of watermelon and a bottle of Fanta – it seemed her aunt was determined to replenish her stomach content. At Fatti's confirmation that she needed nothing more, her aunt set off to satisfy her own appetite. She walked up to one of many young men selling roasted beef and gave her command. With a knife as sharp as a

guillotine blade, the trader sliced to bits a portion of the flank of roasted cow and handed it to her.

Their provisions in place, they joined the horde and moved towards the ferry. For one who had always relied on nothing but her feet for transportation, Fatti gawped as she went aboard the third vehicle of that day. Still staring at the hundreds of people and scores of vehicles, she watched, open-mouthed, as their bus gently rolled onto the vehicle section of the same carrier.

‘Since there is no bridge, like the hanging ones you cross when you go to some of those distant farms, we have to get on this ferry. It will take us across to the other end of the river, after which we will get back into our bus and continue our journey. By the way, this river Sanaga is the longest in the country. You should have learnt that in school.’

‘School?’ Fatti asked with a trace of excitement.

‘Ah, I have forgotten that you have never been to school.’ Aunt Angela rolled her eyes. ‘Anyway, as I was saying,’ she continued, ‘the ferry works only until 6.00 p.m. As such, cars which arrive after that time have to wait until 6.00 a.m. when the ferry starts work for the day. And I tell you that the mosquitoes here are louder than humans, swifter than bats and more spongy than leeches.’

Fatti looked at her aunt as though she were from another world.

‘I mean that the mosquitoes here know how to suck blood. I hope you now understand why I insisted we leave Nchumuluh as early as possible.’

Fatti looked about curiously. One minute, her eyes were fixed on the people streaming onto the ferry; another, at cars queuing up on the deck; and the next, they were lost in the depths of the river. As the ferry started moving, she almost tripped.

‘Watch out, Fatti!’ her aunt shouted. ‘Come here, give me that packet of food.’ Aunt Angela took the plastic bag from her. ‘Now place both your hands on this rail.’

‘Aunt, I cannot.’

‘You cannot what?’

‘I want to vomit. My eyes are turning. I cannot continue.’

‘Just close your eye and imagine you are on the farm. Don’t

worry; we are soon going to be at the other end.'

'Okay, have we reached?'

'But we just took off, Fatti. Sing a song in your head. Just do anything that will prevent you from thinking about the present.'

As soon as the ferry docked, Fatti pushed all the passengers and rushed out in search for land.

As they continued the journey, they left behind roadblocks manned by police officers, crops sunned on the pavements, traders running and shouting behind vehicles and kilometres of unused land. Names of towns fell out of Angela's mouth, most of which the winds swept past past Fatti's ears.

And finally, finally, after more than five hundred kilometres, thirteen hours on the road, half of which Fatti had spent with her head buried in her aunt's laps, Angela Niba declared, 'Fatti, we have arrived. Wake up! We are in Yaoundé.'

Fatti sat up and opened her eyes. Yaoundé! The stretches of trees and unused land she had grown accustomed to seeing had disappeared. In their place were houses, not the thatched huts of Nchumuluh but cement-built houses, and even a one-floor storey building. The streets were busy. There were cars all over, buses, personal cars and taxis. Eight cars in one glance – that was too much for Fatti. And she was about to get into another vehicle. From the bus they got into a taxi. Fatti was expecting the driver to squash in ten passengers, but he accepted only four. She smiled.

Yaoundé! The place which held a future for her. The place which was to transform her dreams to reality. Yaoundé may not have been good for some of her friends, but it surely was going to be different for her. What else could she do but to hope? There was nothing left for her in Nchumuluh. Yaoundé had to be different. It had to be the place where she was finally going to start walking in the shoes of a boy. Though it was almost dark, she knew the place was going to become the light of her life.

Fatti Ashi yawned and stretched. Her eyes still closed, she lifted her hand to her face and clawed her jaw. One second, she was still as though back to sleep; the next, she was wriggling her bum and thumping her elbows as though checking out the surface bearing her. Mefo's bed was cosy, but not so cosy and supple. Aunty Angela's lap was chubby and wide, but it had borne only her head; and the resulting numbness from remaining pinned for too long on the same spot, added to the strain of having her body oddly twisted along the bus seat and her aunt's lap, were very far removed from the comfort that now enveloped her entire being. If she was not on Mefo's bed and Aunty Angela's lap, the last two places where she had consciously fallen asleep, where was she? Fatti flung her lids wide apart, sat up with her elbows propped on the mattress and looked around.

She did not have to wait long for answers. Just then the door was thrown open. 'Good morning, Fatti. How did you sleep? How is the village? How is everybody in the village? How are your brothers? I am Peace, your new sister. You arrived when I had already fallen asleep. You see the depression on that pillow?' Peace asked, pointing to the second pillow on the bed on which Fatti's was still sitting. 'It was made by my head. Patience sleeps in this other bed. Stop looking about like someone who has landed in space. This is just a house and I will make it familiar to you. You are staring at the wardrobe. It is like a cupboard but one in which you will pack your clothes; ours are already inside.'

'Peace, wouldn't you even give Fatti a chance to fully get up before you start dishing out all those sermons?' Aunty Angela asked as she walked into the room.

'Hey, Mama, you know how anxiously I was waiting for Fatti. You are not nice, Mama. Why did you not wake me up to greet Fatti when you arrived last night? And did you people like the cock stew we prepared?'

'Cock stew, Peace? Where do you come from with that? What

makes you think the fowl was not a hen?’ Auntie Angela shook her head. ‘Fatti, this is your sister, Peace. I heard her telling you about Patience and Precious. Where are they? Tell them to come and greet Fatti.’ With those words Auntie Angela walked out of the bedroom, leaving Fatti and Peace to continue their explanations and explorations.

‘Come, Fatti, let me show you around the house.’ Fatti followed her hand which followed Peace. ‘I have never been to the village, but my mother has told me that life there is very different from here – that you live in small huts. Therefore, I am going to describe the house to you like a teacher teaching a child the alphabet. Are you ready?’

Fatti nodded. She was unsure what to make of the eager girl who was a few inches shorter than she was.

‘First,’ Peace continued, ‘this narrow path is the corridor. That room over there belongs to my parents. The other door leads to Precious’ room, which also serves as guest room. Follow this smaller door and you will enter the bathroom and toilet. You see that the corridor opens into a much bigger room. This is the parlour, the place where we eat, relax and receive guests. That door over there takes you into the kitchen.’ Like a housing sales agent presenting a house to a potential buyer, Peace continued her presentation, and Fatti followed dutifully, poking her head here and nodding there.

Only on her mother’s intervention did Peace take a break. ‘You and Peace are almost age-mates. Peace is twelve and you are fourteen. I am sure that is why she has immediately taken to you. Precious is first and Patience is his follower. Precious is 18; Patience is 16. I have sent Peace to the store just to get her out of the way so that you have time to unpack your bag.’

Back in the bedroom, Fatti noticed the mirror standing on the table. She walked to it and looked inside. Round face, big eyes, full body. It had never occurred to her that just as she looked at people and took away impression, they did the same to her. For the first time ever she saw what people saw when they looked at her. Yes, she had a vague idea of her image from looking into water surfaces and metal objects, but as she stood in front of the mirror, she did not simply

see the girl standing in front of it. She saw a girl Peace's generation, but one who had lived twice as long through her experiences. Nchumuluh was behind her; she did not see it in the mirror. Rather, she saw Yaoundé look back at her.

If she was going to take advantage of Yaoundé then she had to start by getting solutions to the major worries that had emerged following the house visit. First, how did one use a pot for a toilet? Secondly, if there was no fireside, how was she going to warm herself in the evenings? And finally, where was she going to keep her nose, for a house in which people slept and cooked and bathe and went to the toilet would have many scents, some not nice at all.

'Here, Fatti, this is a toothbrush for you,' Peace said as she walk into the room. 'Let us go to the bathroom to brush our teeth and take a bath. Don't worry; I will show you anything you don't know.'

The hours passed and the day disappeared, carrying more of Fatti's ignorance along. Never had she amassed so much knowledge in one day. Was it a foretaste of the kind of learning that went on in a classroom? She hoped and looked forward to it. Apart from her inability to keep shoes on her feet, there was one major discovery before Yaoundé could begin to look familiar to her.

'Light?' Fatti exclaimed. 'Where is it from?'

When her aunt pointed to the glimmering bulb on the ceiling, she stared at it in wonder.

'Yes, Fatti, I know that night has come with the most thrilling discovery of your day: A room floods with light at the simple flick of a switch.'

'Why did I not notice it yesterday night when we arrived?'

'You were too tired to be observant.'

'Light!'

At that moment, she wondered if that was what Makam had meant when he talked about 'round tubes which had the light of the sun in them and made the night to shine like day' To her electricity was just like catching the sun and carrying it into the house. At that instance, Nchumuluh seemed so far and so dark. Gone were the unreliable flicker of an occasional candle, the shaded beam of the sooth-stained kerosene lamp and the amber flame straining under a

black pot. Yaoundé was light and the city was life.

True to her words, Peace stayed by Fatti's side, waking her up with a new English phrase and explanation, and bidding her good night with another. Thanks to the teacher's dedication and the pupil's determination, the lessons found fertile ground. This facilitated life in the entire household. Though she was excited about Yaoundé, Fatti did miss Nchumuluh. Some consolation came in the presence of Precious, who reminded her of her brothers. However, while one man was a comfort the other was a threat. Who and how? Peace was eager to know. Yet Fatti answered by staring intently at Uncle Polyandrew each time he walked by.

'I have noticed you often stare at my father. Why?' Peace asked one day.

'I don't know. Maybe it is because I am not used to living so close to a big man.'

'An adult.'

'Okay, an adult. I am not used to living in the same house with an adult man.' The sight of a grown man along the corridor, in the parlour and all over in the same tight enclosure was another of those daily realities she needed to get used to. Everything about Uncle Polyandrew's proximity reminded her of something in each of the three kings of her former life: her father, Tchafo and Angu.

As the days and weeks went by, Fatti became more accustomed to her new environment. Her unfamiliarity with shoes gradually became an ability to keep them on. Soon she started hankering after them to the point where she dipped and forced her feet into any shoes that strayed her way. After sometime she grew weary of the habit – shoes had become the next common thing around the corner. One more day and she will be one-month old in Yaoundé.

Her fifth week in Yaoundé coincided with school resumption for her cousins. She had understood by now that Yaoundé was not synonymous with school. What then was going to take the place of the farm? Fatti was prepared to be efficient at whatever was required of her. She was ready for anything but routine chores. The dread was so palpable she spoke in her sleep.

In place of the cock's crow, Aunty Angela walked into the girls'

room and hauled the blanket from her body. 6.00 a.m.: that was when she started her day by preparing the first meal of the day for those whose day actually started out of the house. Very fast, she learnt how to prepare breakfast, which consisted mainly of displaying tablemats, teacups and teaspoons in front of five of the six dining seats. Next, she boiled water in a kettle and poured it into a flask, which she placed alongside the beverages on the table. A short walk to the nearby store and she returned with two baguettes. Given that she already knew how to concoct leaves, spices, water and oil with various proteins and carbohydrates to produce edible meals, cooking lunch was not such a difficult task. Adding a strange ingredient or two here, leaving out crayfish or onion there, she rapidly familiarised herself with Yaoundé cuisine. She also learnt how to prepare some new dishes, inviting her hands and mouth to become acquainted with hitherto unknown feelings and tastes.

Not all duties were as adaptable as cooking. In the village, when she had felt too tired to walk to Angu's compound and beg for a charcoal iron, she had often dampened, folded and slept on the clothes in question. Now, though the electric iron was as efficient and timesaving as it was strange, learning to use it had been a little bit of hassle for a while. Concerning cleaning, her other major task, Auntie Angela had given strict orders: 'Mop the parlour, kitchen and toilet floors every day, and the rooms once a week; dust the furniture daily.' By furniture she meant the set of chairs comprising a sofa and two accompanying armchairs arranged around a coffee table, and the dining set of six chairs which made allowance for only one visitor. When unexpected guests showed up at the front door during mealtime, Peace and her siblings often gave up their seats and joined Fatti in the kitchen. On such days, Fatti's food tasted differently, since it went down alongside the small talk her ears treasured.

Furniture also included the stereo system. Whenever Fatti got to the radio and gramophone, she placed her dusting rag on the floor, where it stayed for about thirty minutes – time during which she absorbed the images of musicians gracing the disc covers. 'These Afro hairstyles, A-trousers and boat-heeled shoes as Peace calls them!' Fatti giggled until tears rolled down her eyes. The city had

shone the light on new hairstyles, some as weird as Auntie Angela's jelly curls; yet, it was comforting for her to discover that amidst all the braids and jelly curls, suits and tight dresses, jeans and leather jackets, there were still some people who went for locally tailored clothes and natural low-cuts hairstyles. This was always the stance she took wherever she and Peace engaged in the debate on 'village or city dressing'.

The afternoons were different from the mornings in that Fatti spent more time with Peace, who returned from the Government Primary School at 1.00 p.m. Patience and Precious had a more complex program at the Government Practicing Secondary School. All three usually left the house at 7.30 a.m. with their father, who saw them off in a taxi before heading to his office at the Federal University of Cameroon, Yaoundé. Auntie Angela, a nurse at the Centre Hospital in Messa, worked morning, afternoon or night shifts depending on the hospital roster.

The evenings opened up another new world as Fatti sat watching Peace turn pages in the process of doing homework. Her curiosity for such learning and the opportunity to finally get to know more about the letters and words she so loved were just two more factors which kept her bound to Peace. All other reasons aside, Peace's primary school work offered more hope than either Patience's form three or Precious' form five equivalents. In Peace's class seven books, Fatti felt closer to her magazine.

'Peace, you don't know just how happy I am to have finally told someone about that book. What do they —'

'—a magazine'

'You just read my mind. So they call that kind of book a magazine?' Fatti appeared lost for a few minutes. 'I am just very happy to have finally told someone about the magazine and the story of the white man.'

'About the white man, I refuse to spoil it for you. It will be more interesting if you make the discoveries on your own.'

The days moved by. Apart from the few strange bits which had not yet found their place in the block, life had fallen into a habitual pattern. Soon two months had flown by and Fatti with them. Not

only had she cast aside the disappointments of not going to school and having to do chores, but she had actually started enjoying every minute of her new home and lifestyle.

‘Our reading this morning is taken from Exodus 32:7-8. In this passage, we read about how God spoke to Moses, telling him to go down for the people, the Israelites, whom He had rescued from slavery in Egypt had apostatised. The people had cast a metal calf and worshipped it, offering sacrifices to it, taking it for their god. Bow your heads let us go to the Lord in prayer.’

‘Our dear Father,’ the Pastor called out, ‘we invite you in our midst today to come and take control of this service. Seal out all distractions and cast aside all demoniac intrusions during this solemn moment of worship. Anoint my lips, oh Lord. Inspire Your humble servant as I proclaim Your message to Your beloved children. We make this prayer through Jesus Christ, our Lord.’

‘Amen.’ The congregation opened their mouths and their eyes.

‘At this moment I call on you to turn to the person or persons next to you and shake their hands. Welcome them in the name of the Lord.’

‘You are welcome in the name of the Lord.’ The phrase was repeated over and over as hands gripped and briefly imprisoned others.

The shepherd watched on from the pulpit, mouth white in a teeth-filled smile. ‘God loves you.’

‘God loves you,’ the flock echoed.

‘He will protect you.’

‘He will protect you.’

‘Smile for Jesus.’

‘Smile for Jesus.’

‘Amen.’

‘Amen.’

‘Thank you. May the name of the Lord be forever praised. Alleluia—’

‘—Amen.’

Pastor Arrey's smile lost some presence. 'People of God, you have all come here today to worship and glorify the Father, to commune with Him, to abandon your troubles at His feet. Most of you have given up sleep, while some of you have redefined your schedules just to come here and spend some time with the Lord.' Pastor Arrey's smile lost more presence. 'But how many of you have left behind your wives or husbands or children? How many of you would walk back into houses full of relatives who were too busy to come to church? How many times have we stayed away from church because other pressing duties called? Our Lord asks for so little, but even that seems too much to many of you, to most of us. We scream out the name of the Lord whenever problems start punching us, but we forget Him the moment peace or its shadow appears. Where do we think our God is when we forget Him? How do we think He feels when we come to Him only after the witch doctors have failed us? The Israelites cast a metal calf for their god. Our situation today is worse because we have not one but many metal calves; indeed, we have many other gods. When we are not offering sacrifices to the witchdoctor, aren't we worshiping money or work or something else? Well, let me tell you what God does when we desert Him: He sits here in this church waiting for us. God sits here just waiting for us to knock on His door. We have introduced evening service on Wednesdays and Fridays at convenient hours, but only the elders and a handful of you show up during such mid-week services. People of God, now is the time to call upon the name of the Lord. Do not wait until it is too late to seek Him. The things of this world are here to serve us. Avoid turning the table around by becoming slaves to worldly things. The witchdoctors ... ' Pastor Mathew Arrey continued haranguing the congregation on creating more time for God and incarcerating the sorcerer and other gods forever. In response, some worshippers occasionally nodded in agreement; others kept jolting out of sleep; still others yawned, surely tired of the traditional lengthy sermons.

'It is two weeks to Christmas. How many of us have asked ourselves if we are ready to welcome our saviour, Jesus Christ, who will leave His home on high to come dwell in our midst? On the

other hand, how many of us have spent all our time making physical preparations like buying new clothes and toys for our children, buying gifts, and making a long menu for that day? Just how many of us have made the effortless effort of asking God to prepare our hearts for His Son's coming?'

Pastor Arrey paused as though waiting for an audible answer. The congregation replied by intensifying the silence. Even those who had been conveying their impatience by tapping their feet immediately froze – the slightest movement could be a betrayal. If such an attentive response was what Pastor Arrey had expected from his flock, then he had succeeded. Without another word he walked solemnly from the pulpit.

Offertory was the next item on the agenda for that morning. While the choir led the singing with popular choruses, the worshippers dipped their hands into handbags and pockets, then clapped and danced all the way to the basket at the front of the church and back to their seats. Soon Pastor Arrey was asking the congregation to stand for the final blessing. Soles brushed and rustled against the floor, knee joints flexed, and the air became replete with silence.

'What a wonderful sermon, Pastor! May the Spirit of God continue to inspire you.'

'Thank you, Sister Angela. May the Lord bless you and your family on this Holy day. By the way, I have not been seeing your parents. Where are they?'

'They retired to the village.'

'Extend my greetings to them. Once more, may the Lord bless you and your family.'

Standing at the exit of the church, Pastor Arrey conferred similar blessings to all other worshipers as they stopped by to shake his hands and congratulate him. The worshipers, especially the women, in turn created small groups to exchange greetings, stimulate and propagate Sunday morning gossip on the pastor's sermon, the service and other happenings during the previous week.

'Sister Angela, how are you this morning?'

'I am fine in the name of the Lord. And how are you too, Sister

Agatha?’

‘The Lord is good to me. Who is this strange child who seems inseparable from Peace?’

‘She is Fatti, my niece – the child we talked about some months ago. I don’t know how I’m going to succeed in separating them.’

‘You know I travel a lot. Flying in and out of different temperature and time zones so frequently does not give me the chance to remember such trivial issues. Nonetheless, it is good to take some of those children from the village and improve upon their lives, give them a taste of the city while hoping they make use of the opportunities. And why are you talking about separating them? You should be happy Peace has a good friend right at home.’

‘That’s the problem. I’m afraid she may start desiring Peace’s life. She may start nurturing interests which may never be satisfied.’

‘That sounds complicated. Perhaps I can drop you and your family off somewhere?’

‘That is very kind of you, but you know we live at two extremes of town. I know it is difficult to remember the locations of tiny quarters in our struggling city when you are so used to the likes of New York, London and Paris,’ Angela Niba said with a smirk. ‘Well, you have not asked about the child you told me to get for you. Have you forgotten about that too?’

‘Oh, I got another child. I would rather have gone to the gallows than stay for so long without a maid! Am I giving you that lift or not?’

‘My large family cannot fit into your car. Just take the children. Polyandrew and I will follow in a taxi. Thank you so much.’

‘You are welcome. See you during the womens meeting on Thursday afternoon.’

‘Pastor should not hear you say that. Have you forgotten about the Wednesday evening service?’

‘Oh, what do I do with this head of mine which is no better than a sieve? Anyway, let me go.’

A few steps away and Agatha walked back to Angela’s ear. ‘Your niece surely looks better naked than in that dress. And ask your husband to join the choir – his voice can send the devil running from

hell.'

'The problem with Agatha is that even when she can't help, she can,' Polyandrew Niba said to his wife as Agatha walked away. 'She is always overzealously eager to help. You can imagine the type of help she will give under such circumstances. I just cannot cite another person like her, someone who is ready to do anything for a "thank you". She walks about in search of the next 'thank you'. And watch her eyes gleam as she offers the "you are welcome".'

'Stop criticising my friend who is just trying to be nice.' Angela defended. 'What harm is there in offering to drop off the children at home?'

'Just wait; you will find out when we get home.'

Angela Niba and her husband walked into the living room of their Melen apartment thirty minutes after the children, who themselves had arrived thirty minutes later than expected. 'What happened?' their father wanted to know.

'Aunty Agatha made three stops on the way. She—' Peace was brutally interrupted by her mother who burst out: 'Fatti, you have not yet laid the table? What have you been doing since you returned?'

'Don't worry, Mum; I will help her so we do it faster,' Peace said.

Ten minutes later the food, which Fatti had prepared before the 9.00 a.m. service, was sitting on the dining table and the family around it. They dined from plates resting on straw tablemats, which in turn sat on a polished wooden table. Fatti sat on a low stool in the kitchen with her plate suspending on the edges of her knee. She filled her stomach with the meatless remains. The screeching noise produced as silverware collided with china contrasted sharply with the subtle sound of Fatti's fingers jamming against plastic. Every now and then, small talk and delicate laughter would rise from the parlour and filter into the kitchen to dissolve the intense silence accompanying her.

'Andy —' Angela Niba grinned '— we have spent some great years together, haven't we?' The statement was followed by a yell: 'Fatti we are through! Come and clear the table,' and another grin. 'And God had blessed us with great children.'

During the rest of that Sunday afternoon, Angela Niba kept a

close eye on Peace and Fatti, who went about the house like two sides of the same pair of shoes. Angela even affixed her ear to the door of their bedroom just to siphon off more of their talk about the upcoming Christmas season, Fatti's first in Yaoundé. What she heard displeased her, for she sighed all the way to her bedroom.

For one who had never been to school and who had spent her entire life in the village, Fatti was on a roller coaster ride of education. From one day to the next, she had moved from being analphabetic to informally educated and could go higher if she continued with such zeal. She had to come up with a way to dampen Fatti's enthusiasm and curb her excitement. Perhaps redirecting her zeal towards religion would do the trick. After all, she was just as curious about the Bible and Christianity as she was about Peace's school bag.

'Fatti' Angela Niba called out from her bedroom.

'Fatti, Mum is calling for you,' Peace relayed the information.

Fatti covered the short distance from the girls' room to her aunt's. 'Yes, Aunty, that you are calling for me?'

'Your mother told me that your father had stopped you from going to church?'

'Yes, Aunty, he said he did not want us to have anything to do with the white man, Fr. Max. But he changed his mind after some time and gave us permission to return to church.'

'Do you like God? Do you like the way we worship at our church? I know you grew up in a Catholic Church, but I am sure you like the way we worship at the Christian Apostolic and Evangelic Mission.'

'I like God,' Fatti said solemnly, 'and Peace has told me many nice things about your church.'

'To be a true child of God you have to be baptised. Therefore, I think it is good that you receive baptism and be officially welcomed into the house of the Lord. I will discuss the issue with your mother. I also have not forgotten that you have to learn a trade – either tailoring or hairdressing. You have not been here for up to a year, have you?'

'No, Aunty.'

'You can go.'

Fatti walked out of the room with a frown forming and growing on her brow. She had accepted that school was not for her – that had been a dream too far. Through Aunty Angela's prompting, she had started harbouring the more realistic one of becoming a tailor or hairdresser. Now that she had become eager to supplement chores with professional skills, Aunty Angela was doing everything to postpone fulfilling her part of the bargain. And she made eleven months of hard work from dawn to dusk seem so small. Aunty Angela had consumed her conscience; she had chewed her conscience and swallowed it.

As a child in the village, she had depended on her parents for food, shelter and education. On the other hand, her parents depended on her and her siblings to keep the compound clean and help them on the farm. Their parents gave them protection and they in turn gave their parents their strong hands and bodies. What she had seen in the city so far was that parents worked hard for their children and children simply offered a 'thank you'. To fill the gap the parents got other children like her to offer them their strong hands and bodies for next to nothing.

She had been glad that Yaoundé was light but now she concluded that the city sun and lights shone but not on outsiders like her. For the likes of her, the sun never rose; day was never born; the night lived on. Indeed, was the life of an informally educated city girl who lived on remains, cleaned after everyone and relied on leftover affection from a junior better than that of an uneducated villager who swarm in family affection, who was defined by chores and whose exaggerated bride price had condemned her to the life of a permanent spinster.

'I just don't know if my life has become better or worse,' Fatti muttered.

As the weeks gave way to months, Angela Niba became more overtly hostile towards Fatti. The more she yelled the clumsier Fatti became.

'Fatti. Fatti. Where is that stupid thing in this house? That teacup had been in this house for decades – my husband used that teacup when he was in university. Now you walk in and it becomes shards.

What happened to it?’

‘I ... I ...’

‘I am not a priest and you are not in a confessional! Speak out! First, it was you and then it was you again. Three times – you, you, you. What do I do with you? You broke my glasses, you cannot clean my house well, you put food on the table late. What do I do with you? Tell me! You eat my food, sleep on my bed, bathe with my water, but you cannot do the simple tasks I require of you. Look at the time! You know I have to prepare several dishes for the meeting that is to start in less than three hours, but you still have not improvised a fireside outside. Go out there and split that wood. Let me not see you in this house without seeing the splinters, I mean splinters of wood which you come to present. Get lost, you fool.’

‘Aunty, I don’t feel very well.’

‘Stop lying. You think I don’t know those tricks. Get outside there and do that work, you lazy child.’

Her joints hurt. Her head reeled. Her body was hot like a pot on the fire and her mouth dry like an empty well. She stuck out her sore tongue in search of moisture, but all she got was coarse contact with scaling and extremely parched lips. Her skin was so damp her clothes could be wrung for water. Her stomach was empty but she could not think of any more nauseating sight than that of food. She had never felt like that. Fatti did not understand what was happening to her.

Would her aunt believe if she told her that she had never split wood, that splitting wood had always been work for the boys? What was she to worry about at that moment: how to stay on her weak feet, how she would succeed in splitting the wood or how to try to prevent another yelling session? With what little energy she could muster, she walked to the backyard and picked up the axe. She lifted it in the air and slammed it on a log of wood. Three bangs and the log of wood showed no wound, talk less of a slit. Thirty minutes later, a crystal-clear bead of sweat hung from the edge of each of her earlobes, appearing just like the earrings she had never possessed. On the ground lay the fruit of her sweat: the splinters of wood scattered all about.

A hand appeared in front of her, a hand with a bottle of water.

Fatti snatched the plastic bottle, uncapped it, inserted its neck into her mouth and sucked out the water to the rhythm of her profound breathing, which made the bottle screech rhythmically. The bottle empty, she stood staring into the sky, still inhaling and exhaling deeply. The hand reappeared. Only after she had inclined the empty bottle on the waiting palm did she lower her eyes to meet those of her benevolent housemate. Even before she had lifted the bottle to her mouth, she had known who it was: not the smallest palms but the biggest heart.

‘Mum says that you should take these malaria drugs after you have eaten.’

‘Thank you, Peace.’

That night like the days before and after, Fatti slept on her feet and with her eyes open. Her name had become the most common proper noun in the house – there was always something for her to do, and no matter how hard she tried, Auntie Angela always managed to question her efficiency. This resulted in the angry words and hateful expressions, the queer looks and rage-filled voice. Such treatment upset Fatti to the point where she spoke in her sleep.

Yet a few weeks down the line, Fatti appeared to be more relaxed despite the ever-growing pressure. She had not learnt to accept the situation; she simply had found a way of coping. What scared her most at that point was her inability to become scared when Auntie Angela appeared. Even when she knew she was guilty of wrongdoing, she did not feel terrified. It was as if the fear had been uprooted from her being and flung into space. Deep within she understood why she felt that way. It had all become routine. Auntie Angela would yell and call her names, then what next? If she belted or flogged her with a gas pipe, what next? If she threatened to send her back to the village, what next? She would go back to square one and start all over by yelling and then beating and then threatening.

At fifteen, Peace Niba was what every rational parent in Yaoundé could hope for in a teenage daughter. While her parents' friends called her an example, her schoolmates called her the superlative student. Her studious efforts had paid off: She had just obtained her West African School Certificate, giving room for double celebration, since prior to the release of the examination results she had refused to let anyone mention her birthday, preferring to postpone it until the scoreboard spoke out.

'Pass and have two cakes or fail and receive none,' had been her mother's term.

Now Peace giggled as she welcomed the birthday wishes, belated by four days, and congratulations for her excellent performance. The family was all there to celebrate with the one it openly described as the best of the Niba's three children. For a girl of fifteen, Peace was tall, her trim body terminating in a head embellished with a heart-shaped face. However, she was too plain to be described as pretty and too dainty to be associated with unattractive; average suited her well. If people failed to come up with a consensual description of her appearance, one thing on which everyone remained unanimous was the goodness of her soul, the cleanness of her spirit. One proof of that trait in action was the manner in which she interacted with Fatti, whom she fondly called the twin sister she never had. Even on this day born with her name in the air, anyone who watched her closely could tell she had Fatti on her mind and that her joy had a tinge of sadness.

She stared at the table with mountains of food and excess drinks. She looked over at the gifts and wondered at promises of more to come. Yet two months ago, when Fatti had turned seventeen, Mother had refused to buy even a few bottles of Fanta for them to celebrate. All attempts at rallying support from Patience and Precious to put pressure on her had yielded no fruit. To them Fatti's birthday did not merit to be mentioned. While they marched home and threw their bags right on the dining table, some of their mates and even some of

Mother's friends walked straight from their classrooms and offices into the kitchen. They swallowed Fatti's recipes the moment they walked through the door, yet they considered her simply as a housemaid, though she was family.

'Peace, come and cut your birthday cake,' her mother called out.

'Fourteen plus one candles just for me?' Peace said as she approached the dining table. 'Would I be able to blow them all out?'

'We will all find out together. At one you start. Ready?'

'Yes, Mother.'

'Three! Everybody come and join me. Let us start all over. Three. Two. One. Hurrah. Great.'

As Peace walked away from the cakes, she looked over at Patience who was in any mood except partying. After taking the West African School Certificate Examination twice before finally spotting her name on the list of laureates, she now had to repeat another class for poor academic performance. That meant she and Peace were going to take the Cambridge Advance Level Examination at the same time. Precious, on the other hand, had turned out to be what their parents had always prayed he would not be – a dropout. It had taken threats, placating, spiritual intervention – through special intercessions replicated by the Pastor and members of the three prayer groups to which Mother belonged – and finally surrender, for him to obtain his secondary school certificate. That had been three years ago. Since then he had proved to be the best as far as garage work was concerned. A mixture of talent and will – that was how the garage owner described him. Precious had not found a future in formal education, as the family had wished, but he had found a compelling vocation in motor mechanics.

What about Fatti? What future was there for her when even the training in hairdressing or tailoring, which Mother had used as the leading card to deprive her of parental affection, had been buried? What had impressed Peace most about Fatti, giving birth to the vision she now held for her, was the eagerness with which she had embraced the alphabet. When she had realized, three years back, that Mother was not treating Fatti as she had promised, especially remembering the difficulties they had been enduring before her

arrival, she had decided to make Fatti's future her problem. Starting with a slate and chalk and graduating to an exercise book and pen, she had not rested until she was satisfied that Fatti could shape and pronounce the letters of the alphabet. Presently, it was difficult to single her out from a throng of primary school graduates; rather, it was easy to single her out because her English was exceptional for her level. *Gulliver's Travels*, *Things Fall Apart*, *Treasure Island*, *Pride and Prejudice* and others had left their mark. It was time to take the next step.

The clock chimed 7.00 p.m. The guests had returned to their homes. Her father sat on the veranda, crowning the day with a can of beer. Peace walked into her parent's bedroom.

'A child like you is the perfect prescription to any heartbroken parent. You make me so proud, my daughter. Have I ever told you that your father and I named you Peace after going through a very thorny year? I am so happy today that I don't want to exhume memories of those awful days. The bottom line is that you are a dove; you bring me peace.'

'Thank you, Mother. I am happy that you are proud of me. M-u-u-m,' she dragged the appellation.

'Yes, my love?'

'Mum, since I have given you much cause for celebration today, and since it is my birthday, can I make a request?'

'Sure, dear, you know you can ask me anything.'

'Anything?'

'I am your mother. I will do anything for you. You know by that I mean only things which I can recommend as your mother and things which are pleasing to God.'

'You have raised me as a Christian child. How can I request something which diverts from God's ways?'

'That's my girl. So what is on your mind? Let it out.'

'M-u-u-m, it is just that ...'

'Tell me, if it is not possible to grant your request I will let you know. I will not eat my daughter. Come and sit down.' Her mother beat a spot next to her on the bed.

Peace sat down and heaved deeply. 'It is just that I think it would

be good if you send Fatti to school.'

All signs of encouragement which had been flitting across her mother's face instantly fled. 'Hm! Is that what she has sent you to come and ask me?'

'Nobody has sent me; and you know Fatti will never have the guts to do that.'

'That does not mean she doesn't entertain such thoughts. I had warned you from the very onset. I had told you that all you were doing by trying to teach her will only sow ambitions that may never be satisfied, thus causing more frustration.'

'Mum, I am not asking for much but only that you send her to evening classes. She will still be able—'

'Evening what? I took her from her parents so she could assist me in the house, not to get her pregnant. You want her to go to evening classes. Would you be there to watch over her? And what if she is attacked or some other misfortune befalls her on her way from school at night?'

'Okay, can you get someone to come and teach her at home? I will also help. I have taught her how to read and write, and I will continue to help her. Do you know that she has already read so many books of the Bible?'

'What has got into you, Peace? You have taught her how to read and write – that is good and that is a lot more than I bargained for when I took her from the village. I promised to send her to learn a trade, and I have not forgotten. Thanks to your efforts at elevating her literacy level, she will race through any training and make a name for herself fast. Look, let's not talk about this again. Let's talk about her spirituality. Pastor Arrey was asking why she has not yet received baptism. I think that is what she needs most now.'

'Mum, she knows so much, and it is not fair that she should be classified as uneducated simply because she does not have certificates. She revises with me every day. She studies Mathematics, English, Geography, History, French, Biology and many other subjects. Yes, and literature – she adores literature and history. She—'

'Enough! Enough of that, Peace! You have heard my final word: Fatti is not going to any school.'

Peace stared unblinkingly at her mother as though she had peeled off her skin and was, for the first time, gazing at what truly lay beneath the hide of the woman who walked about with her mother's face.

'Fatti.'

Peace watched as her mother again called out, hoping her voice would transcend the door or wall to the parlour. It did not. 'Let me fetch her.'

'No, don't worry; she will hear. Fatti!' This time Angela Niba toned up her voice.

A minute later a timid knock came through the door.

'Come in, Fatti. Your sister and I were just talking about your baptism. What do you think? Would you like to be baptised?'

'Baptised?' Fatti asked.

'Why do you sound surprised?'

'I have already been baptised in the Catholic Church.'

'What? Why didn't you tell me before? And your mother never mentioned it either! Well, it does not matter. You have not visited a Catholic Church for more than three years, and you have been worshipping with us during that time. Above all, you need to be born again. So do you want to be baptised in our church?'

'Yes, Aunt, ' Fatti whispered.

'You don't seem very convinced with your answer. Is anything the matter?'

'No, Aunt, ' Fatti bent her head but raised it a moment later. 'But it is just that ... just that ...'

'Just what? Speak. I will not eat you.'

'... just that I had already started going to the Catholic Church.'

'I have already said that you will be baptised in our church, the Christian Apostolic and Evangelic Mission. You will go to the church tomorrow afternoon and register for pre-baptismal classes. Is that clear?'

'Yes, Aunt, ' she answered softly.

'You should start searching for a Christian name. Do you have one?'

'Blessing, ' Peace offered.

‘That’s a nice name. What else does one need for baptism? Ah yes, godparents.’ Aunty Angela thought for a while and said, ‘Your godfather is going to be Felix my brother. Aunty Agatha will be your godmother. I don’t want to hear about a godmother from some previous baptism!’

‘Yes, Aunty.’

‘I did not ask your opinion on that. I informed you,’ Aunty Angela stressed. ‘Well, as I have said, you will go and see Pastor Arrey tomorrow. You need to start getting used to your Christian name: From now you are Blessing. You can go.’

She walked out with her head to the floor. Fatti Ashi! She had been such a blessing to her parents, particularly her father, that everyone had fought to give her a name. Fatti had come from her mother’s relatives. Ashi was Mefo’s gift after her second chance at life. One of her paternal aunts had come from Buea to add Blessing to the list, though the name had meant little to them until her baptism. Her godmother, Suum’s mother, had a particular fondness for the name. She had eventually ended up with so many names that at the appearance of Ashi, her father’s name Fopou had been pushed aside with the pretext that she was bound to replace it someday. Now Aunty Angela wanted to resurrect her Christian name! Blessing! Was there any blessing in changing her faith, rather, in bringing a new belief to add to Catholicism and traditional religion?

True, she had become accustomed to the boisterous and vigorous Pentecostal way of worship, which differed markedly from the solemnity and ritualism of the Catholics. However, that did not mean she wanted to leave the Catholic Church. Although her father had eventually given her and her mother permission to return to the white man’s Church, and although her mother had secretly got her baptised, she had not frequented the church as often as before. For one who had been in church every Sunday, one month away had been a long time. For one who had still been floating on the surface of the faith, twelve plus months away had been time enough to forget almost all of what she had learnt.

Once in Yaoundé, it had felt good to hear God’s name again regularly, but it had been disturbing to hear it in a way difficult to

reconcile with her fading memories. That manner of soulful singing which penetrated some worshippers so deeply they closed their eyes to the world; the profound prayers; the language stranger than French – calling upon the Lord in tongues, Auntie Angela called it – the Christian Apostolic and Evangelic Mission had been a new chapter in the story of Fr. Max's God. The Lord's Supper was another aspect which stood apart from the Catholic way of worship. Though non-participants were sent out of church during the sacred meal, curiosity had taken her to the window. Did a black pastor do anything to incite such rumours like those of gluttony and greed aimed at the white priest? Apparently not, for the bread was shared out in equal sizes and the wine in small cups passed around on a tray. Daily communion at the Catholic Church and monthly at the Pentecostal Church! What more was she to see?

She loved God and she loved the Bible; however, it was easy to deduce that if she kept moving from one school of Bible thought to another, she might end up entangled in a religious web. Then there was Tchafo. Even if she never saw him again, she would always carry him with her. His scars stared at her each time she looked at her body.

'Take the two beliefs and merge into one.' Her father's words reverberated in her ears always. How were they all doing? When was she going to see them again?

Fatti and Peace sat on the dining table, each engrossed in the fantasy world of the book in front of her. Feet balanced on a footstool, Polyandrew Niba was lounging on the sofa, listening to the eight o'clock radio news. Angela Niba, who had just finished darning, sat crocheting on the armchair. But for the voice of the journalist blasting out from the receiver and the sound of the ceiling fan blades cutting through the humid November air, the house was an echo of silence.

The sound of approaching footsteps brought all four heads up. The bold rapping on the main door got Fatti to her feet. She opened the door and let in two strangers: an older man whose head almost collided with the doorpost and a much younger one who would certainly have looked better had he cleared a path in the middle of his face by chopping off some of his merged, bushy eyebrows.

'Good evening, Madam; good evening, Sir,' they muttered to Angela and Polyandrew Niba.

'Good evening. Welcome. Have a seat.' Angela put aside her crocheting, got up from the armchair and parked herself into the sofa, next to her husband's. As she did she threw a probing glance at the two strangers and then at her husband. Anyone who could read her knew she was inquiring if he knew who they were.

'I know you are wondering who we are and what we are doing in your house at this hour of the night,' the older man spoke out from one of the armchairs. 'I am James Chi from Santa and this is my nephew, Joseph Tepo. He is from Nchumuluh.'

At the mention of Nchumuluh Fatti, who had returned to the dining table, twitched and almost dropped out of her seat. Angela reacted in the same impulsive manner, though supplementing her action with words: 'I too am from Nchumuluh. My husband is from Bafut. What can we do for you, Mr. Chi?'

'Let me go straight to the point since it is quite late.' Mr. Chi cleared his throat. 'You know that a young man who does not make friends with the old is like a tree without roots. Therefore, I have

accompanied this young man here because he has seen a bunch of ripe plantains in your yard which he would like to harvest, which we would like to harvest.' He paused briefly as though waiting for an intervention. When none was forthcoming, he continued: 'I shouldn't tell you that if a bunch of ripe plantains is not immediately harvested, they might rot and become useless and rejected, or roaming birds might dip their long beaks past the rind to savour and consequently mess up their soft and sweet interiors.'

'The Prime Minister of West Cameroon, His Excellency Augustine Ngom Jua, today received in audience ...' The journalist took advantage of the very audible silence which followed the remark.

Fatti slowly lifted her head from her book and fixed her gaze on the two strangers. For one second she thought she was back in Nchumuluh, for only there did she ever hear people refer to girls as plantains. The older man was bold. Only a very bold man could talk about plantains rotting and being rejected in front of strangers he was trying to impress. But which of Auntie Angela's daughters could they have in mind. Would Auntie Angela allow any of her girls to get married before they had finished school? She pitied the two men who would have to return without the promise they came for.

Polyandrew Niba was the first to regain use of his lips, but not before toning down the volume of the radio. On second thought he switched it off completely. 'I don't know how far you have travelled—'

'We are based here in Yaoundé,' Mr. Chi butted in. 'If it is late we can come back tomorrow or the day after. The important point was that we make our intention known today.'

'Mr. Chi, it is good you have not come from far, because I am sure you entered the wrong compound. Yes, I have plantain stalks growing in my compound, but none of the crops are ready for harvesting.'

'You are a true son of our soil.' Mr. Chi smiled. 'I know most people preserve the best to serve to someone they know. But since you cannot be certain that such a person would show up, don't you think it is better to satisfy the person who is present on the spot?'

The conversation so far had been between the two elderly men; however, judging from the way Angela Niba had been twitching in her seat, the trend was bound to change soon. 'You are not referring to my daughters as "plantains", are you?' she barked out. 'I spend time and money to educate my children, sacrifice to make them comfortable, panic when they are ill, keep vigil with the stars when they are troubled, and you dare walk right into my house and refer to them as "plantains"? Do you think you are here in Nchumuluh or some other village?'

'Simmer down, Angela. Just let me handle this.'

'The oldest is not yet twenty and you call that too old, rotting?'

'Angela, I have told you to let me handle this,' Polyandrew talked down his wife and then continued politely to the guests: 'As their mother has said, they are still young; but they will grow up and will someday need to marry. Who knows, things may still work out for your son then. Which of them did he have in mind?'

'Polyandrew, what are you talking about? You want a daughter of mine to come and present herself to people who refer to her as "a bunch of plantains"?'

'Which one?'

'Peace and Fatti, leave that table and go into your room,' Angela ordered. Her sudden outburst made the dining table the centre of attention.

'She is not even in this room. Her name is neither Peace nor Fatti,' Mr. Chi said. 'Don't worry, Madam; if you don't want us to even see her then we cannot go against your will.'

'If she is not here it means she can only be my Patience! So it is my Patience you call "plantains"? This is not true.' Angela gave a thunderous clap. 'Blessing, what are you still doing there? Did I not tell you to go to your room?'

Fatti crept out from beneath the dining table. 'I ... my pencil fell, Aunty.'

'So that is she! Blessing. We never knew she was also called Fatti.' Mr. Chi looked at her and turned to his companion, 'You made a good choice, Joseph. It is a good omen when the woman who opens the door to welcome you into the house is the very one you have

come for. 'The gods are with us.'

'What? Fatti? I mean, Blessing?' Angela clapped her hands twice, folded them across her breasts and then silently inclined into the chair.

Blessing let go of the pencil and books she had been clasping in her hands.

Polyandrew bowed his head and started tapping his feet.

The strangers each brandished a smirk.

'How can you want to marry Blessing?' This time Angela spoke out first. 'Just what do you see in her?'

'Madam, when a man sees a bunch of plantains ... I mean to say that when a man decides to eat something, he will not accept any replacement no matter how tastier.'

'Are you saying that Blessing is better than my two girls? Are you trying to compare Blessing with my daughters?' When Angela turned and saw Blessing still hanging around, she bawled: 'What are you still doing there? Did I not say you should go to your room? And keep the door closed!'

Blessing scurried through the semi-dark corridor into the girls' room, carrying her curiosity with her. Peace shared her inquisitiveness, and Patience, who had been briefed on the situation, was just as eager for more information. Blessing plastered her ears to the closed bedroom door; however, all her attempts to eavesdrop were in vain. The only report she provided was a shake of her head. She had been leaning on the door for about fifteen minutes when it started jamming into her jaw, moving her with it. She looked up and into her aunt's eyes.

'Come here, big ears! Come and hear all since that is what you want.' She pulled Blessing back to the parlour and shoved her in front of the seated trio. 'This is Blessing Ashi.'

'Blessing, how are you?' Mr. Chi asked, smiling.

'I am fine, Sir. Thank you,' she answered without looking up.

'I did not realise you were so beautiful. Are you trying to hide your beauty? Why don't you lift your head?'

Toying with her fingers, smiling through the corners of her mouth, Blessing attempted a glance in the direction of the guests.

Joseph leaped to the edge of his seat and stared at her as though she were a twinkling star.

‘She is beautiful, isn’t she, Joseph?’ Angela Niba, who just minutes ago had been agitating like God over one lost soul, now sounded liked Satan on a recruitment mission.

‘She is a beauty queen, Ma’a.’

‘You are absolutely right! I have just beauty queens here, beautiful and expensive queens.’

Blessing’s jaws drooped. How could she have forgotten? She could run away from the village, but she could never run away from her fate. She could live in the city, sleep in the same room with Patience and even share clothes with Peace, but she could never be one of them. Their destinies were mapped out differently. Their paths were bound to deviate someday. Just how could she have let the city and the Niba family get into her to the point of forgetting where she came from and what was pursuing her?

‘You know a beauty queen is expensive, don’t you, Joseph?’ Angela smiled slyly.

‘We know, Madam,’ Joseph’s uncle intervened. ‘We know what Nchumuluh demands as bride price; however, we would like to know what your fathers and grandmothers demand in exchange for their daughter’s hand.’

‘Tell me what you have in mind, and I will tell you what you have left out.’

‘Okay. Meat, enough meat, three drums of palm oil, a bag of salt, sufficient firewood and some cash.’

‘Very good. Impressive!’

‘Angela, let me handle this,’ Polyandrew Niba said.

‘Well, as you yourself said,’ Angela continued as though she had not heard her husband, ‘Blessing is a beauty queen and a very costly one. After all what you have listed, including the cloths and other items which you left out, you will have to reimburse the two hundred thousand Francs to her first husband.’

‘What?’ both Joseph and his uncle exclaimed at once. It was difficult to tell if their surprise arose from the knowledge that Blessing had previously been married or from the price on her head.

‘Yes!’ Angela laughed. ‘She is pretty but her beauty will forever remain hers. Divorced at thirteen, she is now worth a fortune at seventeen. Ha ha. So you really thought you could marry her over my daughters? And I thought that when a man decides to eat something nothing can stop him? Well, gentlemen, if you have nothing more to say, my family and I would love to retire for the night.’

Angela Niba stood up and was about to show the guests the door when Joseph abruptly exclaimed ‘I will marry her.’

‘What are you saying, Joseph? Are you out of your mind?’ His uncle asked.

‘I am the one who led you here, Uncle. I came here for Blessing, and I will not leave without the permission I seek.’

‘A tree without roots withers. Do you know that, Mr. Chi?’ Angela asked. ‘It seems your nephew has lost the roots you lent him?’ She derided. When she noticed a smile flickering on Blessing’s lips, she turned to her and shouted, ‘Go back to your room!’

Again Blessing scurried away towards the corridor, but this time she was determined to do more than just wait for information to come to her when others deemed it necessary: She hid behind the cotton drape separating the corridor from the parlour. Gaping through the sight-hole, a tear in the blind just large enough for one eye, she caught up with the conversation, which had advanced to another level:

‘How old are you, Joseph?’

‘Twenty-five years old, Ma’a.’

‘What do you do for a living?’

‘I am a police constable on my way up, Ma’a.’

‘Have you ever heard about Adam and Eve?’

The two strangers looked at each other and then back at their hostess. ‘My uncle did not warn me you might ask such questions.’

‘You may not know Adam but he certainly lives in you – soon your uncle will tell me the snake did not warn him I may ask such questions.’ She rolled her eyes. ‘Do you know Abraham and Moses? Do you believe in Jesus Christ? Are you a Christian?’ The three questions fell out in rapid succession.

‘Hm—’ Joseph’s uncle began but was interrupted:

‘I asked the young man! Joseph, at least you know whom you were named after, don’t you?’

Joseph cleared his throat and began: ‘Ma’a, you know that our ancestors are the roots of our culture, but that is not to say I don’t know Jesus. I was baptised as a child in Saint Joseph’s Parish, Mankon, where I lived with my parents. However, I later moved in with my grandparents in Nchumuluh. So ... so it is a little difficult.’

‘You have come to ask for my daughter’s hand and you are twisting the issue of your faith?’ Angela paused. Just when the silence was becoming uncomfortable, she proceeded: ‘What I will tell you is that we are Christians and we don’t believe in polygamy. If you want Blessing, you have to promise that you will maintain a monogamous union, like my husband and me. You have to promise that you will not take another wife.’

‘Angela, what kind of statement is that? Don’t you know you might just put ideas into the young man’s head?’ Polyandrew intervened.

‘Let me answer, Sir,’ Joseph said. ‘I understand you, Ma’a. It is true that our people say that the man who cannot manage more than one woman is not a real man. But we all know that such wisdom belongs only to the village. It would take a rich man to consider two wives here, and that is not my situation. Don’t get me wrong,’ he added quickly. ‘I can take care of your daughter. What I mean is that I don’t intend to take more than one wife.’

‘That is good. So how do you intend to marry her?’

‘We will go to the village and consult the diviner to find out if the marriage would be successful, after which we will do the *knock door* and the traditional marriage.’

‘If that is all you plan to do with my daughter then you can leave now and spare me the disgrace. So you don’t intend to call witnesses in front of God and man? You did not even mention a civil marriage. Do you think I rear concubines?’

‘No, no, no, Madam, don’t be so fast. I assure you that we will take your daughter to court and then to church. Remember that this young man is a tree with roots.’ Joseph’s uncle said but then he suddenly seemed preoccupied. ‘Madam, if we have to repay the bride

price of two hundred thousand Francs to Blessing's former husband, tradition says that we don't have to offer your family any more gifts.'

'You are right, Mr. Chi. My wife overlooked that detail. Thanks for bringing it up.'

A few more minutes of questions and answers and the strangers of less than an hour ago walked out with the title of 'in-laws in the making'. Behind the closed door, they left a grumbling hostess: 'What else does that fellow think the diviner would tell an ignored bachelor who has finally found a safe haven? Hasn't anyone ever told him to prune those linked eyebrows of his – a challenge to the still disconnected road from Yaoundé to Nchumuluh? And he has just found a wife as easily as ants find sugar! A police constable on the way up! I cannot believe all this has happened under my roof. This Blessing was bound to bring me all types of things.'

Another man. Another man had been imposed on her. The shame of a second failed marriage at her tender age would be too much. But was she ready for another experiment after the last one with Angu? Did she have what it took to make a marriage work? On the other hand, what if marriage to Joseph was an opportunity, an escape route from Aunt Angela's house? If she could just like him! If he could just be likable!

Tilted head and bashful smile – that was how Blessing went about her chores. Joseph was often there, and when Joseph was there, she spent her time smiling, her obvious shyness keeping her tongue trapped in her mouth. Even if shyness were not a hindrance, what could she possibly discuss with him? Each such confession to Peace was followed by a prolonged period of silence.

The village girl in her thought he came too often, especially as she was not used to sharing intimate space with a man harbouring intentions as his. Furthermore, village customs gave room for such visits only after an affair had been made public by the payment of bride price. The city girl, on the other hand, loved every minute of it. The sensations his presence aroused were as new as they were exciting. Though she had initially been disturbed by his decision to come knocking only when he knew she would be the one to open the door, she had eventually reasoned that he was probably just trying to avoid the kind of probing Aunt Angela had submitted him to on that first day. Again, no one would have allowed her to treat her fiancé to five slices of meat as she did when she was mistress of the house. Joseph likewise displayed his kindness by bringing her gifts – perfumes, cakes, jewellery. Courtship was the best the city had offered her in terms of both excitement and emotional exploration.

Exploding into sensual giggling, avoiding his gaze when he looked in her direction yet fixing her eyes on him the moment his attention seemed elsewhere, Blessing gradually dispelled her shyness. Joseph was an equally active player in the game of visual hide and seek, which quickly advanced to the stage where their ogling stares

greedily searched out more interesting parts of each other's anatomy.

Courtship also turned out to be an opportunity for Blessing to go beyond the first and second impressions of her fiancé, to hear his story and note key events in his life, to pull aside his clothes and scan the treasures beneath. So whose words about her had been so compelling that Joseph had made up his mind to marry a woman who lived in his imagination? His uncle's daughter, Blessing's mate at enquiry classes. Pre-baptismal classes had not just brought religious knowledge; they had brought marriage, turning Joseph Tepo, the stranger of two weeks ago, into a household name at the Niba's.

One Saturday morning, Blessing was cleaning the bathroom when she heard her name drift out from her aunt's partially open bedroom door. She crept closer to the door and caught up with the conversation between Peace and her mother:

'Mum, do you really think Blessing should marry Joseph? Is marriage the best thing for her at this moment?

'You should be happy for her, given that no man would have married her in the first place. You should also be happy since she will no longer need to learn the hairdressing you have always despised. And don't forget the bride price issue. I know she will be a good housewife. I trained her very well. She can cook and maintain a house. She will take proper care of her husband and make babies for him. Do you know that God is great?' Aunt Angela smiled. 'Theresa, your paternal aunt in Bamenda, had informed me that she is to do a two-year training course here in Yaoundé. You know I cannot turn down an in-law. With limited space in the house, I was still wondering how to handle the delicate situation when Joseph appeared. That is not all. Theresa's course is part time; that means she will be able to help with house chores. You see that God works in great ways. You should never lose trust in God, my daughter. So how is school?'

Blessing turned away. She entered the bathroom and locked the door. Irrespective of Aunt Angela's ulterior motives, she definitely had a point. No rational city man would take for wife an uneducated girl with a bride price the cost of Peace's five-year school fees. Either Joseph was in love or he was the ignored bachelor Aunt Angela

considered him to be.

Having someone admire and desire her to the point of insisting on acquiring her despite her financial burden had really boosted her ego. She wanted to be happy and she wanted to be positive, but she also could not forget the disaster she had experienced in the name of marriage? The circumstances may be different, yet it was still about a man imposed on her. While Angu had been ripe and controlling, Joseph appeared to be innocent and inexperienced. Would she succeed with Joseph where she had failed with Angu? Angu had come along with many wives on his shoulders, wives she had had to serve alongside their common husband. What would Joseph bring? Would she be the head of a chain of wives? In the village, it had been about cultivating Angu's farms, cooking and washing for him, and answering present when his nocturnal trumpet sounded at her door. After four years of watching Aunt Angela and Uncle Polyandrew, she had an idea of what a city man could want. However, watching was far from experiencing, and every man came with his own exigencies and strategies to subordinate his woman. What would Joseph want?

If eavesdroppers always have something to worry about, then Blessing was no exception for something in her changed after that day. She walked about with anxiety which did not disappear even when Joseph was around, or which rather became gloom when Joseph was around. It was therefore with much zeal that she welcomed the new form of entertainment in a neighbour's living room. When she was not reproaching Peace for being too young to calm the butterflies dancing about in her stomach, she was bowing to the lure of the 'talking picture-box'. Counting on the neighbour's programme they, the young and old of the quarter, waited eagerly for 5.00 p.m. – the hour when the neighbour with the TV set transformed his house into a cinema hall. While the parents made themselves comfortable in the sitting room, filling every available space, the children were content to hang at the window, some straining their necks from as far as ten metres away. Even passers-by stopped for a while just to get a glimpse of this latest wonder. Dorothy Dandridge in *Carmen Jones*, John Wayne in his typical

Westerns, Blessing, Peace and other children watched the same movies over and over again they surely visited the settings in their minds and dreamt of the stars. In the presence of less privileged friends, they argued over the different plots they had each coined to match the moving pictures.

‘If only those people could speak in a way that we understand,’ Blessing often lamented to Peace, ‘we would not be arguing like this.’

Black and white though the images were, the distinct features of Fr. Maxworth Cain stood out on most of the men living inside the ‘talking picture-box’. Wind the clock some years back to the era of Fatti who had just arrived from the village and the sight of a white woman would have been a rare bad grain in a basin of groundnuts.

The days passed, the excitement over the discovery of the TV set grew fainter, but Blessing’s worries kept multiplying. ‘Peace, I really have many questions eating me.’

‘Like?’

‘How am I going to survive in the marriage?’

More questions kept her awake at night. Would she be able to succeed with Joseph where she had failed with Angu? Would Joseph dialogue or would he dictate like Angu? Now that she was soon to be baptised, would the church be of any help? Would Pastor Arrey be able to decipher and interpret what had remained hidden to T’chafo? Would God’s protection be clearly visible where that of the gods had remained concealed? Would Aunty Angela be willing and have enough influence to intervene should she need someone to stand up for her? Would Aunty Angela succeed with Joseph where her parents had failed with Angu?

Aunty Angela. She was the source from which flowed some of the answers Blessing sought. She took Blessing to the Yaoundé branch of the Nchumuluh village meeting and registered her as a member in the women’s wing.

‘One of the main advantages of being a member of such a *njangi* group,’ Aunty Angela told her, ‘is that you will always have the physical and financial support of your tribespeople. They will be there to stand by you in times of trouble and sorrow like laughter and joy. Another advantage of this *njangi* is that it has a monthly rotating

fund into which all members are required to save fixed or varying sums of money. Each month a designated member takes home the cumulative sum, which can enable him or her to start a business or solve a major problem. You can also get a loan at comparatively low interest rates. In short, a *njangi* is your insurer and your bank.'

Aunty Angela also mentioned the value of friendship:

'You will never be lonely here in Yaoundé if you are a member of a *njangi* group. Nonetheless, I warn you to choose your friends wisely. As good as company can be, a crowd is bad for your marriage. Your marriage is bound to have problems once it becomes a public issue. So make friends but make just a few, a few wise friends.'

'Peace, you cannot believe that I saw three other wives of my age group in that Nchumuluh *njangi*,' Blessing told Peace when she returned home later that evening. 'Aunty said I should make friends but choose them carefully. Judging from the severity of her tone and considering that I am not an outgoing person, I have decided not to get too close to any of the girls. After all, I already have you.'

That same evening, Aunty Angela called Blessing into her bedroom, turned the key in the lock and started, 'I have told you about the village meeting and cautious friendship, but I must also tell you about men. When he tells you he is going to a *njangi*, do not pressure him to tell you when he will be back. After his francophone employer or neighbour or landlord has given him headache all month, he longs for those moments when, instead of biting his tongue as he strangles the French language in the process of trying to be understood, he leans back and fluently spills out his beloved vernacular. And when our men meet their tribesmen, hardly do they close the day without celebrating their victories or drowning their troubles in some bottles of beer. Therefore, when he tells you he is going to a *njangi*, do not wait up for him. And if he gets up the following morning looking for unnecessary trouble, do not argue with him, don't even answer him. Just know that he is looking for a way of transforming his guilt into a problem for which you should bear the blame. He may ask you to explain why his socks are out of his shoes or why his tie is knotted wrongly. Don't take it to heart. Just maintain peace in your home by ignoring him. Do you

understand?’

‘Yes, Aunt.’

Aunt Angela heaved deeply and then asked, ‘Do you have jeans trousers? Yes, you do – I have seen you in them. Those trousers!’ she shook her head. ‘I don’t know if you are going to leave them in this house or if you will carry them along. If you do, if you carry them to your matrimonial home, you should know when to put them on.’ Aunt Angela paused for a short while. ‘Blessing, never go to bed in jeans trousers.’

‘But, Aunt, I don’t wear trousers to bed. I sleep in my nightwear.’

‘I repeat: Never go to bed in jeans trousers, no matter how angry you are. Do you understand what I am saying?’

‘Yes, Aunt.’ Blessing bowed her head.

‘Are you sure you understand?’

‘Yes, Aunt, now I understand.’

‘That which God has given you is not a weapon which you use to punish him. Reject him for some other reason, but not as punishment or retaliation; do you hear?’

The last piece of advice was about an everyday reality. ‘I tell you that in this world where we live, everyone is always right. Avoid the war of “rights” during which both of you would try to prove you invented the word “right”. As I have said, we are all always right. But for the sake of peace, one person has to bow and accept he or she could have made a mistake or not heard properly – mind you, that does not mean the person really blundered or had wax in her ears. If those small misunderstandings which often mature into large disputes have to be put at bay, then one person has to be humble enough to accept he or she has lost. As a woman, you will have more peace in your home and you will keep your husband more at home if that person were you. In borrowed words, if you don’t trust yourself to keep your mouth shut, then fill it with water which you should neither swallow nor spit out until the storm has calmed. Have you heard me? I will not repeat this.’

‘Yes, Aunt, I have heard.’

‘And don’t forget God.’

Four weeks of open but secret courting and occasional chaperoning soon became history. The trip to the village had been scheduled for a fortnight. According to the detailed plans, Blessing and Joseph would travel to the village with Aunty Angela and Joseph's uncle – for the *knock door* and traditional wedding. One week after their return, Blessing would be baptised into the Christian Apostolic and Evangelic Mission Church. Gone was the gloomy and anxious Blessing. Family reunion, marriage, Christmas, and her favourite meal of pounded potatoes and beans! She longed for Nchumuluh.

It was December 1967. Development in Nchumuluh had come on the back of a camel – slow and obsolete by Western standards. Yet the villagers had readily espoused each new project, which to them had been and continued to be as exciting as the prospects of a successful Apollo 11 mission to the moon was to Westerner. Thanks to the forages funded by an international organisation, the women and girls now spent less time trekking for water and more time ploughing farms and bending over steaming pots. The potholes on the farm-to-market road had been filled in with the effect that the men now spent less time on the road to village and town markets and more time in seclusion with their wives; evidence, the population had increased by twenty percent.

Development had a name: English. It also had a pseudonym. The French had come closer. The villagers were not only using the Franc *CFA* as only currency but they were also consuming French products – beer and brewages. Some of them were gradually learning French from their Kombou neighbours in East Cameroon. France was coming closer.

With a spate of city dwellers visiting home to invest and pensioners, particularly coastal plantation labourers and civil servants, returning home to settle, tradition too had moved on. While some of these cultured indigenes had bagged imported goods, others had come with the determination to enlighten the mentality of their people. They had been accumulating victories. Rather than displaying skulls on slabs, a few successors now constructed special skull huts; most extracted a molar of the deceased before burial. The molar had started taking the place of the skull.

Catholicism too had developed with the rest of the village. It had grown such deep roots in the once unfertile soil of the land that two more priests from the Diocese of Buea had come to assist Fr. Maxworth Cain. They were not missionaries but West Cameroonians diocesan priests trained in Enugu, Nigeria. This growth had been favoured by the refutation of some prevalent conjectures. It had been

established that the priest did not charm the worshippers during the Eucharistic celebration, and that all what he did or did not do during the Consecration of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ were in accordance to the doctrine of the faith. Another relevant factor was that the people were beginning not just to be familiar with the worship but were actually finding their place in it. Their culture had gradually begun to infiltrate into the worship. The altar cloths and priests garments were designed with traditional fabric. The lectionary procession was becoming a display of traditional dance, and during special Masses, gunshots were fired at Consecration. The desire of the clergy was that it should not simply be a matter of culture coming into the Mass but the faith also moving out to meet the people in their homes and social circles. They prayed that those traditional practices which sowed division be banned in favour of those which promoted unity.

The old converts like Nkem and Suum's mother were now the mothers of the Church, the mothers of the priests, as they loved to be called. The Church had become the pride of those first Christians. They were leaders. They took initiatives. The Church was no longer simply an issue of worship but part of their lives. It had a social dimension. It filled the emptiness. It gave them reason to forge ahead and excuses to gather and discuss matters other than tradition. They belonged to prayer and action groups, as well as ministries in the Church. They associated with women from other villages and even travelled to Bamenda for retreats and pilgrimages. Major liturgical feasts also brought moments of joy usually not open to them.

Nkem had been appointed as parochial leader of the newly formed Nchumuluh Catholic Women's Association, CWA, an association founded under the leadership of Mama Anna Foncha, wife of John Ngu Foncha, the current Vice-President of the Federal Republic of Cameroon with Ahmadou Ahidjo as President.

Temkeu Fopou had not taken a fourth wife. Though his newfound faith forbade the three he already kept, his loyalty to age-old tradition prevented him from parting with any of them. Torn between the two beliefs, he had decided to remain stagnant, neither moving forward nor backward, neither divorcing nor remarrying. If

anything, he had been very active in bed. He had fathered three more sons to each of his wives, bringing his total number of children to sixteen. Fatti was not indispensable; she was just irreplaceable.

Totso never made it in the primary school certificate examination despite several attempts. Beaten by figures and letters, he had given up and now sustained his wife and two children with a driver's income.

After spending some years at the Government Teachers Training College in Kumba, in the South of West Cameroon, Mosa had returned home and constructed a two-room house for himself. As a grade one teacher, he now assisted Teacher Alfred as the assistant head teacher in CS Nchumuluh, where the enrolment had doubled. Girls still stayed at home.

'Mosa, have you come back?' Temkeu asked as Mosa unlatched the door of his hut. 'I was just thinking of sending a child to fetch you from school.'

'Is there a problem?'

'It is just that this letter fell out of a passing car this afternoon. A child brought it here saying that my name sits on the envelope.'

Mosa took the envelope and raised it to his eyes.

Temkeu Fopou

C/O Nchumuluh

On the reverse was scribbled the words:

Sender

Angela Niba

Yaoundé

'It is from Aunty Angela in Yaoundé.'

'Read it very fast. What does it say? I hope nothing bad has happened to my Fatti.'

Tearing open the envelope, Mosa skimmed through the scribbling on foolscap paper and then lifted his head and opened his mouth. 'She sends greetings to you and everybody. Then she says that there is a policeman who wants to marry Fatti, and that all of them will come here on the second market day after the one on which she wrote this letter.' Mosa briefly shifted his attention from his father and stared at a distant tree without perceiving it. Suddenly he blurted

out 'That means they will arrive in three days. The letter continues that if you will accept the marriage you should start making preparations because they will not stay here for long.'

'Fatti! So I will see my Fatti again? Hey! Go and call Nkem. Call everybody to come and hear this piece good of news. Christmas and New Year will be nice in this our compound.'

Assembling the family in Achile's hut, later that evening, Temkeu urged the women to start making plans and to despatch messengers to inform near and far-off relatives, friends and neighbours about the event in the making. Since Mefo's death, Achile's hut had become the place Temkeu chose for family gatherings. The door of Mefo's hut was mostly closed. In the old days, it could have been mistaken for the hut of the head of the compound. These days the norm was for doors to be closed, during the day and at night, the doors of the huts of women like men. Hungry strangers had to fend for themselves.

Three days seemed a long time, but finally the day arrived when Temkeu sat at the village square, swerving his head left and right, rolling and wiping his eyes as he carefully scrutinized the human load of each car driving into the village.

'I don't know if I would be able to recognise my Fatti,' he told a man standing nearby.

Given that there was now no particular schedule for cars leaving and arriving Nchumuluh and that Mumba quarter now had a motor park at the village square, Temkeu had set out for the square as early as 10.00 a.m. He did not want his daughter's arrival to be recounted to him. He wanted to be there when she stepped out of the car. He wanted to be the first to wrap his arms around the child who had been out of sight for four years. He wanted personally to be present to shake the hand of the man who had taken the courageous step of giving the Fopou family back their dignity

The third car into Nchumuluh roared in at 1.00pm, but onboard there was still no delegation from Yaoundé. The sound of another distantly approaching car came through at 5.00 p.m. It took a strained view through the raised dust to make out the Peugeot 403 loaded in Nchumuluh style of five passengers behind and four ahead. The car slowed and stopped. Doors opened, legs came down and heads

appeared. Temkeu edged nearer and nearer, eagerly searching each appearing face for signs of familiarity. Seven hours after he had set out, seven hours of pacing up and down, seven hours of filling his stomach with corn beer and palm wine in order to kill time, Temkeu finally made out a stranger familiar enough to be his blood. They covered the short distance and were soon in each other's arms, Blessing smiling, Temkeu spilling out words of welcome. It was a surreal five minutes for both.

The vehicle which dropped Blessing and Auntie Angela waited long enough for Temkeu and his future son-in-law to exchange a few words before heading to drop off Joseph, his uncle and other passengers in their quarters further inland.

The village loved good news and so thirty minutes inside the compound, almost all of the Fopou's neighbours had gathered to welcome the guests from Yaoundé and Blessing in particular. The next day was no different. The people came and went, bringing greeting and taking away joy and small souvenirs. Among the many heads visible through Temkeu's window, in the evening of that day, was the guest of honour and his delegation of male relatives. They had come to formerly ask for Blessing's hand and begin the marriage ceremony were their request granted. Normally, the time between the *knock door* and the marriage varied from one family to another. The decisive factors in the case of the Fopou and the Tepo families were the distance their children had travelled and the duties they had left behind. Hence, the faster they got over with the ceremonies, the better.

This *knock door* was the first of its kind in Nchumuluh village. On one side of Temkeu's hut sat the family eager to please. On the other side sat Angu Matamo and his uncles. The family that usually waited to be pleased had little say on this occasion. The Fopous could only supplicate higher authorities that Angu not change his mind or come up with another condition harder to fulfil. Just before the start of the negotiations, Temkeu stepped outside, leaving everyone wondering what he was up to. He walked into Nkem's hut, pulled Blessing out and took her behind his hut.

'Fatti, are you sure that you want this man? I forced palm wine

down your throat last time. 'This time I don't want you to be the one to force it down my throat.'

'Papa, you can drink whatever they give you without fear,' Blessing said. 'I will not throw up the palm wine which I will drink today. I will keep it in my stomach whatever happens.'

'Okay, I will drink since you have reassured me, but let us only hope that there will be palm wine for us to drink.'

Temkeu returned to his hut and took his seat. At the appointed moment, he introduced the intended groom and his family to Angu Matamo and then recounted the story which everyone present already knew. The rules set the game went underway. After about an hour of deliberation, Temkeu finally brought out the kola nuts which the Tepos had presented to him. He broke several and showed the lobes around to the nine present, including Angu Matamo: Temkeu's former best friend had agreed to the plea that the bride price of two hundred thousand Francs be paid in three instalments. The traditional wedding was set for the following day.

The wedding ceremony lasted a few hours, a few expensive hours for the groom and his family emptied their pockets on the women of the bride's family as they filled the air with fertility songs. The bride and groom, who had walked into Temkeu's hut separately, walked out hand in hand. The Tepo couple was born.

Christmas came and went with Blessing marvelling at the changes four years had brought. Christmas in the Fopou compound began with mass for all, continued with a special meal of rice and chicken stew and ended with the new clothes being washed, dried, ironed and preserved for New Year Day. Just like in the city, the village kept vigil on the eve of the New Year. Everyone was eager to be there to welcome the first seconds of the first minutes of the baby year. Gathered around the mango tree in the middle of the compound, helping themselves to corn beer, palm wine, beer and soft drinks, the family chatted and waited. Blessing watched as her father cleaned and loaded his rifle.

11.25: Temkeu returned and took his seat in the circle around the bonfire.

11.30: He was the one leading the talking.

11.45: He began tapping his Wellington boots.

11.50: He picked up his rifle, positioned the butt to the ground and tapped to the rhythm of his boots.

11.55: He stood up and started pacing around. He did not take his eyes off his watch from that moment on.

00.01: Gunpowder exploded with a loud boom, resounding as other guns were fired from all directions.

‘It is great we have met the New Year.’

‘No, it is great the New Year has met us.’

‘Whether we have met the year or the year has met us, it is great to be healthy and happy and be here to welcome the first second of the first minute of the first hour of the first day of the first week of the first month of the year 1968.’ Blessing’s elaborative phrase put a full stop to the disagreement between her brothers.

As a Christmas gift, Joseph had given her permission to spend the festive period with her family, after which she was to return to spend a few days with her in-laws. Christmas and New Year over, Blessing spent her last day in Mumba visiting some old friends. She was almost eighteen yet most of them looked twice that age. A few resided in the huts of first wives; the majority succumbed to the chores of last wives. Would her life have been any different had she stayed married to Angu Matamo or remained in the village? She would have been just like Susannah. She would have been walking about with an earth-bound pair on her chest visible even to indifferent eyes. Her most faithful piece of clothing would have been a loincloth. The best perfume she would ever have worn would have been smoke. Her palms would have been calloused from rocking the hoe and blistered from gripping hot pots. The wails of many hungry children and more step-children would have been constant music to her ears. She would have borne the perpetual burden of trying to satisfy demanding in-laws, not to mention colleagues and competitors of her husband’s wives. She would have spent her hours of siesta with a bucket of water dangling on her head, a nursling fastened on her back and a toddler nudging at her feet! No wonder open admiration stood out on most of the girls’ faces. As she walked away, she could feel their eyes piercing her back.

From one compound to the next, naked children with dried phlegm on their faces followed her with strange stares. After an hour, Blessing took the path that led home. Whom did she meet on the way? Fr. Maxworth Cain.

‘Fatti, how are you?’

‘I am fine, Fr. Max. Thank you.’

‘I hear you now attend a Pentecostal Church?’

‘I had forgotten that everyone in Nchumuluh is a village crier.’ She looked him squarely in the face as she spoke. ‘I am not just going to the church but I will be baptised.’

‘You have already been washed clean of original sin,’ Fr. Max stated. ‘And you are still a child, Fatti. Why not give yourself some time before making some major decisions?’

‘If I am a child now then it means I was a baby when my mother decided to baptise me into the Catholic Church. Why should my innocence or ignorance matter now?’

Fr. Max blinked sharply but he rapidly disguised the shock with composed words: ‘You are not a non-Christian living in the dark. You have already acknowledged your faith in God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Inviting other Christian beliefs will only sow confusion in your life.’

‘The confusion in my life started right here in Nchumuluh when I used to walk straight from Tchafo’s shrine to Our Lady’s grotto. In Yaoundé at least I don’t have to be a spirit-worshipper in a veil.’

‘Miracles!’ Fr. Max suddenly exclaimed. ‘Miracles! Is that what you are looking for? Is that what your aunt promised you would get in her church? Are you eager to touch the cloak of the prophet or apostle you have in that church? Is—’

‘Fr. Max, you cannot understand. Save your breath and reserve your advice for your Christians when they come for confession.’ She walked away, leaving him staring after her.

Blessing arrived at home to find Mosa sprawled on a mat in front of the entrance to his hut.

‘What is that you are reading?’

He lifted the front cover of the book to her face.

‘*Walking towards God*. It sounds very interesting.’

‘It is the book which the catechist uses to prepare catechumens.’

‘You are reading it. Are you a catechumen?’

‘When you go to that your Yaoundé, you make as if other people don’t exist. So you don’t know that I am a Christian? A Catholic Christian?’

‘Nobody told me. I was wondering how you could be Assistant headmaster in a Catholic school without being Catholic. Anyway, did I tell you that I am soon to receive baptism in a Pentecostal Church?’

‘God is God. Wherever you find Him take Him.’

‘I wish everyone could be as understanding as you,’ she said. Her eyes suddenly lit up. ‘I have a plan but don’t rejoice too fast because it is still a plan.’

‘Most successful projects start as plans. So what is yours?’

‘When we return to Yaoundé we will need to search for a house. Once that is done, I will see if I can ask my husband to allow you to come and spend the holidays with us. An ideal plan would be for you to come and live with us, but I cannot start asking too much from my husband right now. You know that he has not even finished paying my bride price.’

Even before she finished, Mosa had jumped from the mat and was exclaiming heartily, ‘Are you serious, Fatti? You really want me to come to Yaoundé?’

‘Yes, but I just hope my husband will accept.’

Mosa hugged her. ‘Hey, Fatti, you are a very nice big sister. I am so happy.’

The topic of her baptism in a Pentecostal Church again came up with her mother. ‘You have already been baptized. I don’t know why your aunt is insisting to get you into her church. Suum’s mother is not happy with this situation at all. Yes, your godmother is not happy. But what can I say. Your aunt is the one who is responsible for you now.’

‘Fatti, Papa is calling for you.’ The first of her three youngest brothers appeared with the information.

‘Fatti, I am very happy for you,’ Temkeu said once she had taken a seat inside his hut. ‘The other day I sat on the road expecting to see my small Fatti, but the person that I saw walking out of the car was a

big woman. Your aunt did a nice thing to take you from here. Only in a place like Yaoundé could you have found a man determined enough to stand and fight off that bad luck which was on your head. He is a man of courage.'

'Thank you, Papa.'

'Since you have to go to your husband's compound tomorrow, I want that we should go to Tchafo today.'

'But, Papa, Aunty Angela did not tell you that I will be baptised as soon as we return to Yaoundé? They taught us in doctrine classes – no, enquiry classes – I mean the classes we take to prepare for baptism. Yes, they taught us in those classes that we need to worship only God, and that we have to forget about the diviner and all other gods once we choose to follow God. The Bible says that—'

'I had said it! I had said that that place was going to spoil you. See, now when I want to talk, you talk. Before I release one word, you have released ten.'

'Sorry, Papa.' Blessing went four years back in time and her head went down of its own accord.

'Let me tell you,' Temkeu continued, 'have you not heard that I too have joined the crowd following the white man's God? You have not told me anything new. I know all what the white man says about his God, but I am your father and I know more than you. You see, you yourself are even confused about the white man's God. One day you want to eat me because I stop you from going to the Catholic Church, the next day you are the one leaving the Catholic Church for another one which still carries the name of the white man's God. I am your father, I know more than you, and I tell you that our tradition is important and not impotent. Why do you think it was your great-grandfather who sent you back from the land of the ancestors? Why was it not the white man God or His Son who sent you back? For the second time, I tell you that you should take the two beliefs and merge them into one. When you are ready to go to Tchafo, tell me.'

'I am ready, Papa.'

'How can you get into a new thing like marriage and try to refuse protection?' Temkeu asked. 'Do you think you really know who your

husband is? We will give you our own protection here, and when you receive baptism, the white man God will add his own protection. One protection plus one protection equals two protections. It is better that way.'

At Tchafo's, it was different but familiar: the incantations, the scent of his concoctions, the three cuts to add to the numerous scars which already graced her wrists and other parts of her body, the instructions not to let water drop on the incisions before three days. Blessing put Nchumuluh behind her as she recounted the incident to Joseph in the bus, three days later.

'But one thing was different this time,' she said.

'What?'

'Tchafo brought out a cock, pinioned it in his hands, danced about with it and before I knew what was happening, he bit off its head and splashed the blood on me. It was awful, really awful.'

'I did not go to consult the diviner about our marriage since you objected. Sorry that I could not help you when it came to your father.'

'Tchafo volunteered his opinion on our union. He said all was going to be fine.' With a distant look Blessing said, 'My marriage. I wonder what things would have been like had Mefo been alive?'

Following her death four years ago, her skull had been recovered and handed over to her surviving son, her only son. That was where Blessing had spent the last minutes before leaving her father's compound. There, in front of Mefo's skull lying on her father's slab, she had offered her gratitude, followed by her supplications.

Leaning into Joseph's chest, she acknowledged aloud for the first time that Aunt Angela's timely arrival just after Mefo's passing had obviated the mourning that was bound to have enveloped her. She felt her handbag to make sure the pipe was where she had put it, the pipe which she had hit three times on Mefo's skull, inviting her spirit to come live in it.

It had been sad to walk into Mefo's hut knowing it would be barren without her graceful presence. Sitting on Mefo's bed, she had closed her eyes and suddenly seen Mefo standing by the door, sitting on her bed, opening the pot, smiling as she narrated time-honoured

tales, all the while smoking her pipe. The pipe was the first thing she had noticed when she opened her eyes.

So she had lived long enough in the world to start missing people grabbed by death. Yesterday it was Mefo. Tomorrow it will be some other person. Indeed, she was growing older – enjoying the better things of life but also feeling the hard pangs of life's smacks. Was there a way of avoiding the pain of missing people taken by death? Maybe she could protect herself by sealing out all affection? Or limiting her association with others, for the more people she knew the more she would mourn? Or why not just inflating every relationship with love, such that the eulogies and tears would be in loving remembrance rather than profound pain and remorse?

Blessing looked out of the bus window and watched the trees fly past.

Where had four years flown? It could have been four years ago, only her companion now was her husband and not her aunt. It could have been an excited Fatti throwing up, but now it was a calm Blessing anticipating and calculating. Then she had looked up to her aunt for all her needs. Now she had her husband beside her, her parents and brothers behind her and children of her own in front of her. Before, it had been her father and Tchafo against her mother and Fr. Max. Now she had her father and Tchafo on one side and Aunt Angela and Pastor Arrey on the other. Which group was she to choose? Or was her father right in asking her to merge both? 'I was fast to preach to him about baptism. What is Mefo's pipe doing in my handbag?' she muttered to herself.

'Did you say something?' Joseph asked. 'You look worried. Are you okay?'

'I am fine, thank you. How can I not be with you by my side?'

With those words, Blessing placed her head on Joseph's chest and closed her eyes.

Blessing followed Joseph from a winding stony track to a dusty footpath. They crossed over green puddles and stepped on animal waste as they delved deeper and deeper into the slumps of Yaoundé. They passed by men disgorging foamy toothpaste while arguing over a football game and women making a spectacle of beautifying themselves. With fragmented mirrors, the women carried out the rituals of concealing facial spots, adding colour, tracing indiscernible or uneven lines, covering hairlessness and unkemptness, camouflaging body odour and other beauty tricks. The children. One was defecating on a leaf right at the entrance to the house and another running around in shoes so tattered his toes were clearly visible through the holes.

Blessing stared about her repulsively. 'Hm, Joe, where are we? Are we still in Yaoundé? You know I have hardly gone out of my aunt's house during all my years in this town.' She again looked about her. 'This place looks very different from what I know.'

'I am sure your aunt and her husband lived in this kind of place before saving enough to move out. Don't worry; we will move to a better place as soon as we can afford one. You know I spent a lot for the *knock door* and the traditional wedding.'

'I am not complaining. I just want to know more about this... place.'

'This is Elig-Edzoa. Look up there.' He pointed northwards 'Do you see the football field? I will take you there to watch a football match. Will that make you happy?'

'I have never watched a football game. Some Saturday afternoons, Uncle Polyandrew listens to commentaries of football games on the radio. So you will really take me to a football game?'

'Of course.'

'Thank you, Joe! I wait eagerly for that day.'

'There is a small market not far away. That is where you will go for shopping.'

'The market,' Blessing repeated.

Her maiden visit to a Yaoundé market fell under the category of experiences which aroused daunting memories. That morning, four years ago, Auntie Angela gave her simple instructions which made shopping sound quite easy: 'Just stroll down the road and you will find yourself in the market. All you need to do is point to the item you want to buy. You don't need to know the French appellation. Just point to the item, ask for the price and pay. Yes, I know you are wondering how to ask for the price. "Ça là coût combien?" Can you repeat that?'

With vivid images of the scanty village-style market and with Auntie Angela's advice replaying in her head, she set out, confident and excited. However, just the sheer number of shoppers and traders going about their businesses of buying and selling, bargaining and quarrelling, had been enough to cause an uncomfortable stir within her. As she watched two women fighting over 100 Francs, it occurred to her that she could either be overcharged or short-changed. Furthermore, no one had told her to expect a long queue in front of the beef stand, with a butcher who barked at customers and divided his attention between weighing the beef and swatting flies. The various varieties of plantains, which excluded the one she knew and classified as real, was the final straw that had eventually sent her scuttling back the way she had come, her shopping basket filled with nothing but air. As she sped away, her foot accidentally collided with one cocoyam; yet it was a triangular heap that came tumbling down. The sunrays scorching her back, the gravel digging into her kneecap, the market-woman stinging her with insults, she picked the cocoyams one after the other and mounted them into a shapeless pile.

Since then she had become an expert shopper. 'I now bark back at those traders who think I must buy every item I price,' she once told Peace. 'Now that I have a policeman for husband, those women better watch out,' she reiterated some weeks ago.

'We are almost there, Ble.' Joseph said. 'I will have to transfer my furniture from the one room I occupied at Ngoakelle. A married man like me should not live in the student residential area. That is why we are moving into this bigger and more comfortable house.'

Joseph ransacked the pockets of his cotton trousers and brought

out a bunch of keys. He singled out one and inserted it into the padlock. He unlatched and threw open the door. Turning to face Blessing, he smiled into her eyes with the proclamation, 'Welcome to your house, Mrs Tepo!'

Blessing, who all along had been hiding in Joseph's shadow, took a step forward to stand abreast him. Joseph retreated. She spun around to look at him but bumped into his huge smile. She turned around and stood face to face with the beckoning darkness. She did not walk inside. First, she turned her head and surveyed the block. Planks nailed one above the other to form the length and breadth of the four walls. In the village, she had lived in a mud hut. Auntie Angela's house was built of concrete bricks. The only house she had hitherto seen built with planks was Angu's pigsty.

She stared on the outer walls. The original yellow paint was now only visible on the upper parts, which were too close to the roof to be reached by the average hand. The lower parts of the walls were blotched with several designs. It seemed everyone who had passed through the house had left a souvenir on the walls: oily fingerprints, imprints of a muddy football, ink prints of various shapes and colours made by someone who should have been practicing hieroglyphics, sketches by an amateur artist who will never become a professional.

'So this is our house?' Blessing asked.

'Yes, go in, my dear. All of this is just for you, your house. Now you have a house of your own.'

Joseph strode in ahead of Blessing and flung open the single wooden window. A wave of light flooded in to illuminate the interior. Window bars conquered by rust, gaps of missing ceiling boards, pits on the paved floor – Blessing took it all in and then walked towards the door leading to the only other compartment. In front of the closed bedroom door, she disdainfully arched what was left of the doorknob and kicked the door. Just as she was about to venture in, a startled rat skipped up and almost landed on her leg. She squealed and groped for Joseph's hand. Enclosed in his arms, she followed the rat until it disappeared through a hole in the bedroom floor.

'Don't worry, my dear; it is just a rat. We will do something about

those when we move in.'

Nodding nonchalantly, Blessing stepped out of Joseph's embrace and continued her scrutiny of the bedroom. Three of ten louvers were missing; seven were covered in several layers of dust. A tie was hanging on the coat hanger behind the door. Like the living room, the paved floor was pitted with holes. Had all previous occupants been women in pointed high-heeled shoes who were either too many or who spent their time filing in and out of the house?

'Joe, where is the toilet? And the kitchen too?'

'Oh, those are outside. We share them only with two neighbours; and unlike most houses around, we have a roofed kitchen. You see, your husband gets only the best for you.'

Blessing burst into a sudden bout of coughing which she struggled to stifle to no avail.

'Sorry, dear.'

'Thanks. I am okay now. Show me the kitchen and toilet.' She followed her husband outside. They took a narrow bend towards the left wing of the house, continued on a footpath in front a building and emerged at the face of two smaller blocks standing about three metres from each other and constructed with similar wood as the main house. Leaving Joseph staring after her, Blessing ambled to the farther block. She took an eye-glance of the pit latrine and closed her eyes and the door, praying that God should give her courage to open it again.

She moved towards the kitchen, pushed open the door and walked inside. The three-stone fireside was devoid of any traces of ash. The single furniture, a waist-length cupboard with three shelves, reeked of mould as if it had not inhaled air in ages. Generations of cockroaches had invaded the cupboard shelves. The black egg capsules lined the edges while the babies, parents, grandparents and great-grandparents roamed all about.

The fireside had certainly not seen fire for a long time; yet Joseph had told her that the previous tenants had moved out only a week ago. 'A man is his stomach and what lies beneath'. She and Peace had interpreted the statement to mean that a man's wife is his kitchen and his bedroom. What did a kitchen with a fermented cupboard and a

dead hearth say about its mistress? That she spent her time out of it. She preferred to go about the house in high heels shoes. A woman who hated the kitchen and a man who could afford to forget his tie! What an irresponsible couple who could not even prevent their children from soiling the walls. Their poverty and carelessness had surely driven them back to the village. But if only they could have been a little more responsible and hard working maybe they would have been able to cope in Yaoundé. Hardship would not have evicted them from their house. And maybe Joseph would have found a better house ... or a worse one.

Blessing could come up with as many explanations and soothing theories as she wanted, but she could not change the fact that this was to be the house in which she was to live as Mrs. Blessing Tepo. What a baptism for the two new names!

‘Do you like the house? It will be the best I would have lived in,’ Joseph said sombrely. ‘When I left the village many years back, I moved into a room with a friend. After a few years of hard work, I was able to afford the cost of running a similar single room, which served as sleeping and living area, as well as kitchen. Now, for the first time in a long time, I will have the liberty of migrating between four compartments. Hm! Life is really getting better.’

‘I will make you happy here,’ was all Blessing said.

‘I will work very hard to save money and move us to a better place.’

‘Yes.’ She smiled. ‘Yes.’

The very next day, Blessing set to work transforming what was to be the roof under which she was to live the fourth and, so far, most significant phase of her life. Joseph had been so adamant they move in immediately that it had taken the intervention of Peace for him to grant her the two days she had requested for cleanup. Now her back curved, her fingers flexing, her legs in constant motion, her mind devising, her eyes searching and accessing, she mended the house. After fifteen hours of hard labour, Blessing stretched out for the final time and walked about for a final round of inspection.

The house was as perfect as it could be. She now saw in the kitchen, a place where she could bring her recipes to life, hone her

cooking skills and keep her husband at home. She saw in the living room, a place where she could disagree with in-laws when the need arose. In the bedroom, a place where she could close her eyes and not fear that a rat or gecko or some other creature may appear and scurry for the wrong opening. In the bathroom, she saw a place where she could temporarily wash off her husband. And in the toilet, a place where she could poke her nose as often as her impulses urged her.

By evening of that day, she was the one showing her husband around the house. The way his eyes flashed said all what she would have loved to hear. Nonetheless, he verbally expressed his feelings: 'The day I first heard about you, I knew I had found the answer to a problem that had not existed before that day. The day I pledged to repay that inflated bride price to your former husband, I knew I was investing in a real woman. Today, I am a complete and happy man with you as my wife.'

Blessing had one more preoccupation: the furniture. The earlier she saw it and got accustomed to what she knew would not meet up to her taste, the better. Stretched out for the last time on her bed in the girls' room in Auntie Angela's house, discussing with Peace, she let out her apprehension about the sort of bed on which she was to retire the following night.

She took one look at the displayed parts of the bunk bed and nothing else caught her attention. Following her conversation with Peace, she had envisaged all options except jumping out of a double-decker bed. They had talked about couples who shared their bedroom with children and others who lived room apart. They had even joked over the idea of putting in place a room-divider. As Blessing stood looking down at the parts of the bunk bed, she could no longer laugh over the last point.

'Sleep in the same room; share different beds but in the same space! Joseph, what more are you going to show me?' she whispered. 'After all, we cannot afford two bedrooms. Poor pockets usually came up with brilliant alternatives.'

'Did you say something, dear?' Joseph asked.

'No,' she said and instinctively covered her mouth with her

palms. 'I was just talking to myself,' she added quickly.

'We will search for a place to store that bunk bed until the children start coming, that is, if we cannot afford better by then.'

Blessing smiled and carried the carton of kitchenware to their place behind the main house. When she returned thirty minutes later, a bed was standing in the middle of the bedroom. She walked into the room and sprawled on the bed, her eyes to the ceiling. Though she was lying on a cotton mattress, it seemed as if her back was touching the plywood. It was as if the mattress and her skin had melted away, giving way for direct contact between her backbone and the plywood. She closed her eyes and saw herself falling into that hard bed and getting out of it with pain rocking her entire body. Well, it would not be so bad for Joseph would be there to take away the discomfort.

She got up from the bed and walked to the parlour. The pieces of furniture which had been scattered about were now arranged neatly. A cane-chair set and cane cupboard, a dining table with two seats and a radio – that was her furniture. Joseph had placed a few books on the second shelf of the cane cupboard. He had confessed to never having opened a page of the three books, belonging to his former roommate, which had mistaken taken as he parked out to his own place. *Tropical First Aid*, *First Aid To English*, and *Oliver Twist*. It was a skeleton in need of flesh when compared with the number and arrangement of Peace's books on the table in the girls' room.

Remembering Aunt Angela's words that marriage was about complimenting each other, she decided to do something about their bookshelf. She dashed into their bedroom, searched her suitcase, a gift from Peace, and walked out with three books in her hand. The Bible, a baptismal gift from her godfather, Felix Ngalemo, was positioned such that it slept on *Tropical First Aid* – the ultimate soul doctor and the body doctor. Reclining on the Bible was the copy of *Walking towards God* which Mosa had offered to her. This slept on the Bible as an offspring leaning into its mother. Last was Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. Handing her the book, Peace had said it should go as a reminder that reading was very important, since she who read always learnt something and always had an edge over

others. About *Things Fall Apart* in particular she had said, 'If you know where you are coming from, you will know where, in this vast world, you are heading.'

The three books in place, Blessing stepped back to admire the new look of her collection. However, before she was able to complete the smile forming on her lips, wrinkles appeared and creased her brow. What if Joseph became angry when he realised that she had added three books, three just like his? He could think she was trying to compete with him. Perhaps she should remove one book such that his superiority be reflected on the bookcase. No. Leaving them there might just be a good way of knowing where he placed a woman. She was going to find out if she truly belonged only in his kitchen and bedroom.

Her husband was off to work, the house as clean as she could make it, the furniture dusted and the food prepared. Blessing Tepo stepped out into the Tuesday morning sunshine. Her house stood in the middle of the compound with a plank block of two single rooms to the left and an unfinished concrete apartment to the right. The two single rooms were constructed with their doors facing the side wall of her house, and the footpath separating both buildings widened out to the common kitchen and latrine. A university student occupied the room closest to the kitchen. Two weeks in the compound and Blessing and the first neighbour had moved from being neighbours to acquaintances. Yet the occupant of the first room was still a mystery. It was through Joseph that Blessing had learnt that both women had forfeited the use of the common kitchen but not the clotheslines. In fact, it had taken a brawl over who should dry where and when for Blessing and the university student to break the ice. To keep it from reforming, they had agreed on separate laundry days.

Blessing strolled about the compound, following the path to the previously unexplored land behind the incomplete concrete apartment. Like the plants clinging to the soil, she suddenly remained rooted to a spot. Carrots, pepper and tomatoes. The kitchen garden left her transfixed. A strong desire to feel the earth consumed her. She wanted to reconnect with the soil, to caress its particles and exploit its fertility. Noticing the arable land left at the mercy of wild herbs, she murmured, 'I need a hoe.'

Concluding that the land must have been cultivated by one of her neighbours, she walked past her house towards their block. The absentee's door was open. What a perfect opportunity to introduce herself and set into motion the custom of 'my neighbour's property is as good as mine' with the hoe as the first in a long list of items that should subsequently be shared.

Blessing approached the partially open door. Three knocks and several minutes of waiting produced no reply, prompting her to

slightly lift the fringed lace curtain hanging at the door. She had not boarded a ship. Neither had she looked into a magic mirror. She had simply lifted a curtain, yet she had appeared in a different world, a bright and tight world.

Next to a full-length mirror was a dressing table that displayed cosmetics the quantity and variety of which she had only ever seen in traders' stalls in the market. Hangers upon hangers of clothes hung from the clothes rail covering the wall opposite the large bed with thick mattress. The smallish gowns flaunted low-cut necks and were of such pompous and diverse colours they made the rainbow a poor representation of variety. The dozen or so pairs of shoes lined up on the floor terminated in high, thin heels. How could someone stay balanced on such fragile support, the kinds which were surely responsible for the pits on her floor? Perm, curls, waves; blond, brunette, auburn – waist-length wigs hung from the edges of the clothes rail. The walls were covered with posters, some of half-naked women flashing teasing stares at her, others of men in football squads displaying biceps. A white sofa demarcated the sleeping from the living section of the room. The sofa was accompanied by a glass coffee table adorned with a bouquet of red roses and a cupboard exhibiting carvings, pottery and a few fashion magazines. A cane cupboard, like that which held her books, served as the kitchen. It carried a kerosene stove and two aluminium pots, with other kitchenware stuffed on the shelves. The mystery surrounding the forfeiture of the kitchen had been solved; but the problem which had set her on such an adventure still needed an answer. Where was the hoe? The answer was evident from the moment she lifted the curtain. A hoe just did not have its place amidst such audacity and style. She could have been in a fashion shop or even in a furniture showroom, but she was standing at the entrance to her neighbour's room.

'The room smells sweet, like baked pineapple,' Blessing said with a final glance. As she was about to withdraw, it dawned on her that something was amiss. The room was quiet, too quiet. In the village, she had grown up with Mefo's tales, quarrels with the boys and the many debates characteristic of a large family. At Auntie Angela's house, she had Peace, and when Peace went to school, she had the

radio, and when there was no electricity, she had a human radio which could talk all day and all night with neither electricity nor batteries. She could always count on Aunt Angela to make the noise that had become a requirement for normal life.

‘I get it!’ she said. ‘There is no radio in the room. No radio and no newspapers! Whatever her name is and whatever she does dressing the way she does, she surely is the kind of neighbour who knocks on one’s door at six o’clock in the morning with, “Sorry for disturbing. I hear today is a public holiday; is it true?” Always “I hear this; I hear that.”’ Blessing sighed and walked away.

Two hours later, she was sitting in her living room, knitting and listening to the radio, when someone rapped at the door.

Joseph was not due until 6.00 p.m., in two hours. Who could it be? Well, any visitor was welcome. Just the sound of knocking was welcome. ‘Who is there?’ she asked.

‘May I come in?’ a female voice answered.

‘Yes.’ Who could it really be? Perhaps her mysterious neighbour had finally decided to show up. The image of the room still fresh in her mind, she wondered what the girl could look like.

A petite girl with a huge smile gracing her long face walked in. If she had the opportunity to choose her neighbours, Blessing would not have settled for a girl who wore an anklet and so exposed her legs with such short skirts. She looked into the girl’s plain face and could not help wondering the kind of painting into which those vast quantities of liquid, powder and semi-solid multicolour paints transformed her.

‘Good afternoon! We have not met but I am your neighbour, Winifred Mbile. You can call me Wini. Everyone calls me Wini, everyone except my white male clients. They call me Fred.’

Blessing blinked twice, looked Winifred in the eyes and said, ‘I am Blessing, Mrs. Blessing Tepo,’ she stressed.

‘Nice to meet you, Blessing. Tepo? That is a strange name. Where are you from?’

‘From Nchumuluh.’

‘Where is that?’

‘Nchumuluh is in the North of West Cameroon.’

‘Is your husband from there too?’

‘Yes.’

‘I am from the South of West Cameroon.’ Winifred looked intensely at Blessing and said, ‘Judging from your attire, it seems you have not stepped out of this compound today.’ She disdainfully ran her eyes over Blessing old *kabba* and then added, ‘Do you ever go out at all?’

‘I am a housewife. Why should I go out?’ Blessing answered defiantly. ‘My husband prefers that I take care of the house and family.’

‘Don’t listen to the things men say,’ Winifred dismissed with a shove of her hand. ‘He goes out to get money; why shouldn’t you? Well, I work in the night. So you see –’ she flashed her teeth in a wide smile ‘– I am living out my life. Instead of you sitting here all day loafing about, get up and give your life more meaning. Do something with your life. Get it?’ Another wide smile. ‘I have hardly been in town during the past two weeks. That is why I have not welcomed you to the compound before now. I just saw your door open and decided to make the move. So welcome to the compound and see you some other time.’

Blessing followed Winifred until she disappeared completely from view. ‘Do something with your life,’ she repeated. Just when she was beginning to put out the sparks that had little chances of flaring, Winifred had appeared like an agent whose mission was to strike at the very foundation of the stability she was building for herself. ‘I am living out my life,’ Blessing repeated.

The vision of marriage she grew up with was one of a wife who took care of the household and bore as many children as her husband desired. Aunt Angela and other city women had subdued the husband’s authority and fitted profession into their agendas. However, such city women possessed education, whose absence seriously handicapped her case. ‘Do something with your life’.

The first thing Blessing did when Joseph returned home was to brief him on the courteous visit paid her by Winifred. When she asked to be enlightened on those who ‘worked in the night’, Joseph barked:

‘Blessing, I don’t want you to go near that girl; do you hear me? Girls like her would turn any home into a street! That is why responsible men stay away from women like her. You should do the same. She is a bad girl. Stay away from her!’

‘But you don’t even know her. So how can you say she is bad? She looked kind and was quite friendly, friendly,’ she stressed in the repetitive manner that had crept into her speech.

‘That is the problem with you women: You think every stranger is Jesus to whom you open your door. Not in my house! I will not tolerate such a laissez-faire attitude. If you think she is so nice, then take her back to your aunt’s house and live that niceness there. I don’t want to see that girl in my house!’

‘Your food is on the table.’

Joseph strode to the table, threw himself on the seat, and was about to feed a spoonful of *Ndole* and white yam into his mouth when he dropped the spoon and yelled at his wife: ‘What kind of woman will work in the night but one who goes out to sell her body? Why do you think you only met her today? Because her life is not stable. She goes where the men and the money are!’

Blessing stretched out on the cane-chair. Though Winifred had no radio, she was not going to knock at their door in the morning to ask about public holidays. She turned and stared at Joseph. Only two weeks and he was already another man! Where was the man who used to call her ‘my dear’ and who returned home from work with yoghurt and cakes for her. That man who was shouting at her as though she were a maid was certainly not the man she had married. Winifred could turn any home into a street just as God could turn any street into a home. God was going to make her house a home. She looked at her Bible on the bookshelf and felt good because she had a twenty-four hour doctor for the soul. Joseph had not even noticed that she had added some books to his collection or if he had noticed, he had not commented.

Day after day, Blessing became more accustomed to her new life

of being a wife and being responsible. The house also improved as it welcomed new furniture every now and then. That very evening, Joseph had returned with a pack of a dozen plates. Blessing smiled as she carefully arranged the porcelain plates into one of the cane cupboard shelves. So many of Aunty Angela's plates had she reduced to shards and what insults had followed each shattered treasure.

As the house grew in comfort, so did Joseph shrink in virtue, a conception which his wife conveyed by increasing the number of sighs she emitted around him. She was beginning to feel that her husband was treating her like an overtaxed commodity.

Contrary to Joseph's misconceptions, Winifred had turned out to be a valuable friend and companion to Blessing. It was not surprising then that Blessing's first victory with Joseph had been about Winifred.

'I have warned you, Blessing, and I cannot stay here all day to watch you. Associate with her if you want. You say she is good, have you ever seen a good devil? I have warned you. I will not talk much.'

However, the battle Blessing was yet to win with Winifred was over education.

'I have told you, Blessing, that by staying here all day you are setting your life ablaze and watching it burn. Look at you! You are young and have what it takes to succeed. I just think the starting point for you is formal education.'

'You must have another Blessing in mind. I have never been to school and I am almost nineteen. Are you now asking me to go and sit with babies in the same classroom?'

'No, that is not exactly what I am saying,' Winifred stressed. 'Your cousin Peace has taken away that embarrassment by bringing you up to the level of a primary school graduate. In fact, you can easily pass for a secondary school student. All you have to do now is give value to her efforts by building something good on that solid foundation. All I am saying is that instead of wasting your life in this way—'

'— you should go to school. I should go to school.'

'Yes, just go to school instead of—'

'— wasting my life in this way. No, Wini, I am not wasting my

life, not wasting it!’ She looked around her living room as she spoke. ‘I live here with my husband and we have... we have a good life together.’

‘Okay, you are not wasting your life,’ Winifred agreed. ‘You are simply helping your husband take his forward like the breasts while you stay behind like the buttocks. Maybe I am telling you all this because I don’t have a younger sister to advise, and maybe because I am trying to improve my life by correcting my mistakes through you.’ For the first time since they had started the discussion, Winifred became very serious. ‘If I had obtained my secondary school certificate, if I had not dropped out long ago,’ she was saying, ‘I would not be doing this. My life would not be what it is now.’

‘But you can still go back to school,’ Blessing offered.

‘No, my head is already too hard. Don’t mind this tiny body. I am a lot older than I look. Besides, if I go back to school, it will be in the shoes of a teacher. I will teach my teachers what I know best and anywhere but in a classroom, and in return, they would offer me their most precious possessions. Ha, ha.’

‘Marks?’

‘What else?’

‘You are crazy, Winifred.’

‘And you, my younger sister, are naughty.’

‘Stop calling me your younger sister because I think we should be age-mates.’

‘Whatever! As long as you open your eyes to see reason. The fact is that there is no link between school and me. On the contrary, you and school have much in common. You have all it takes to make it. Go for it. Go get your primary school certificate and continue to secondary school.’

‘You make it sound like ABC.’

‘I don’t know much about you, but I know you can make it if you try. Listen,’ Winifred said carefully, ‘when you must have had three or more children, you will look at your life revolving around cooking and caring for a family in which all members have their separate lives except you, and you will regret. Your husband will continue to grow in his career and your children will leave for school in the morning

and return in the evening to meet you in the same kitchen. Blessing, kill the village girl in you. You are no longer in Nchala. You are—'

'My village is Nchumuluh, not Nchala.'

'Whatever! The point is that if you leave the village to come to the city and cannot improve your life, then what difference is there between you and the village woman? A village woman bears children and grows crops to feed them. Do I need to tell you what a city woman does?'

Blessing kept her lips sealed.

'A city woman tries to improve her life alongside that of her family,' Winifred hammered on. 'Once in the city, she becomes the eyes and ears of her family back in the village. She labours hard since she becomes father and mother to several families – her children need clothes, her parents need food and shelter and her siblings need school fees.'

'Is that why you do what you do?'

'We are not talking about me here,' Winifred lashed out. 'I have a life of my own. I don't depend on a man for shelter and I don't beg for food money.'

'Stop!' Blessing screamed. 'You have made your point. But even if what you are saying makes sense, my husband will refuse to hear any word about putting another Franc into me! I have not even shown him that he did well to spend such a fortune on me.'

'You say your husband has already spent enough on you? I say "no". At this point he has only two options: continue to spend on you or return you to your family and lose all what he has invested so far.'

'Please, please, please!' Blessing lifted both hands in the air. 'Nchumuluh has heard me once. I don't want them to hear about me again. I don't—'

'Tell him you want to go to school. You still have time to register and take the Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination. You can go on to attend evening classes. School fee in such institutions is affordable. Don't even complain about chores because you will still have enough time to perform your diurnal duties.'

'Did I hear you ay evening classes? So you think he will allow me

to go out of his house in the evening? Or do you want me to work in the night like you?' Blessing chuckled.

Either Winifred missed the joke or she simply refused to acknowledge it.

'Hey, I was just joking.' Blessing explained in response to her friend's silence.

'You once mentioned something about your brother coming to live with you. What is his name again?'

'Mozart. But Mozart is to come only for holidays.'

'How do you think women make their relatives members of their household?' Winifred asked. 'They come for holidays and never return. If you don't act fast, before you know it one of your in-laws would have identified the extra space in your house and moved in.'

'But I don't have any extra space,' Blessing exclaimed. 'Our house has just one sleeping room which is even too small for my husband and me.'

'As long as there is something to eat and somewhere to bathe, the floor is good enough a bed for a relative out for his or her share of the Yaoundé experience. Long and short, even if you live in a rat hole, there is always room for one more relative as long as that rat hole houses only you and your husband. That aside, given that Mozart is a grade one teacher, he can accompany you to school. He can even be your home teacher. What is best? You both can enrol in evening classes. Your husband should have no further reason to object on grounds of insecurity and or promiscuity. If he does, it would be jealousy in its purest form. He would be jealous that his wife wants to take his great achievement of a primary school certificate a step further.'

'You are crazy, Wini. Remember that you are talking about my husband.'

'I have a point, don't I?'

'Yes, you planned it all very well but you forgot one thing: the—'

'— money. I never said all was going to be smooth. You and Mozart can do some petty trade. Ask your husband for capital. If he refuses, I will willingly be your banker. I know you know banks work on an interest basis. Education for you, business for me.' She

laughed.

Blessing stayed quiet, dumbfounded. Either Winifred was an angel straight from heaven or Satan's cunning agent present right at the corner of her house.

'Don't look at me like that. I know I am an angel just arrived straight from heaven.'

'But those are my words!'

'What?'

'Nothing. Indeed, you are an angel. A.N.G.E.L.' Blessing spelt out the word. 'What will I do without you?'

'With me you can make your life better, friend. One more thing,' Winifred said abruptly.

'What again? You have already raised so many reasonable points that another word from you may just undo the entire episode.'

'Don't be afraid. I'm dangerous only when it comes to men. Do I have your permission to go on?'

'Of course. I am eager to hear the next lesson on how to handle men.'

'Never spend your money on food. I am not urging you to go to school, get a good job and offer the money to a man. Once you start working, make sure you don't take over the charge of feeding the house. Choose a responsibility with stable rates like utility bills.'

'But it is good to control what goes into the pot. When I have money, I would love to provide good food to my family. It is also important to provide healthy meals so as to keep everyone out of the hospital.'

'Yes, that is what women always do. We spend our money feeding the house – the man with his lion appetite, the many children, the man's numerous friends who always come visiting and his relatives who always need to spend the night. We flush our money down the toilet while the man pays fixed bills and then saves the rest somewhere or in something. In the event of separation – I'm not saying such is going to happen to you – the man walks out with his savings and leaves the woman with the children. Don't feed the house, Blessing.'

Blessing raised her hands to her face and wiped her eyes. 'Well,

earning and spending is still a long way off. Let me make it to and through school first. I will talk to my husband this evening.'

'The ball is in your court.'

'Wini,' Blessing said, 'I don't know where you get all this from. My aunt who has been married for years gave me advice but nothing like what you are telling me.'

'Don't mind those women. They go into marriage and close their eyes and ears, refusing to see or hear anything or anyone but their husbands, those ghostly possessions who are absent even when present.'

'Wini, you are going too far. Don't forget that I too am one of those women.'

'No you are not, at least not yet. You can dance blindly like some of your other colleagues or you can have a life of your own, keeping in mind that you and your husband are two separate beings. I am your angel. Go to school and make a life for yourself and your children.'

To celebrate the future, Winifred invited Blessing to her room for lunch. They ate chicken stew with ripe plantains and flushed it down with red wine.

'What did you say?' Joseph exploded the moment Blessing mentioned the idea of school later that day. 'I had told you not to make friends with that prostitute. She is not married. She is not good for any man and so just wants to transform you into one of her kind. She wants to break your marriage, and you are so stupid to dance to her tune. And where do you think the money would come from for me to throw away on you and your brother?'

'I have written to Mozart—'

'So you take the decision with your lawyer and write to your brother without bothering to inform me?'

'I mean to say that I will write to Mozart. I am sure he has some savings which we can use as capital to start a small business. You see,' she added quickly, 'investing my time in some income generating activity will be beneficial to our family since I would be able to take over charges like paying water and electricity bills. If I go to school and later get a job, our children would have better chances in life. We

would be able to afford better education for them.'

'Then you should be thinking more about bearing children.' With those words, Joseph strode into the bedroom and banged the door.

Blessing smiled as she cleared the table. He had not given his approval; yet he had not entirely rejected the idea. He probably walked out because she hit a nerve. All he needed was more pressure, and she knew exactly how to exert it.

Some days later the Tepo's had a visitor.

'Good afternoon, Uncle Joe.'

'How are you, Peace? Come in and sit down.'

'Welcome, Peace.' Blessing said, walking out of the bedroom. 'Sit down and let me bring you something to eat. I prepared some rice and beans.'

'Blessing, you will not even allow me to catch my breath?'

'As you catch your breath, another guest may come in and ... EAT ALL.' Blessing did not pronounce the last two words but directed her mouth towards Peace's face with the hope that her cousin would read the words formed on her lips.

'You are so funny, Blessing. Uncle Joe, I often come around but never meet you.'

'You know my work schedule is very tight. When it comes to the police there is always someone to chase after or traffic to control or other administrative work to do.'

'I hope you don't leave Blessing all by herself for too long. It can really be boring sitting here all day idling or sauntering listlessly.'

Silence.

'Blessing, Mum sends greetings. Can you imagine that though the holidays are still about five months away, Mum is already making plans for me? She has a friend who works in the Post Office, and she is arranging for me to do a holiday job there. I don't know what kind of work I will be doing, but I look forward to earning some money for my school needs. What about you? Maybe Mum can contact her friend to try to fit you in somewhere. Uncle Joe, what do you think? Such would be an ideal opportunity for Blessing to keep busy while making some money.'

'I think you are right. Since I cannot keep her away from certain

people in this compound, it will be better to take her away from the house.'

'Yes. And since the work is short term, maybe she can continue with school after the holidays.' Without giving him the chance to react, Peace continued: 'Uncle, you have married a very intelligent woman. I was amazed at how easily she learnt. I am still available to teach her, but all of that would be fruitless if she has nothing official to show for her knowledge and efforts. What do you think? Would you allow her to register and take the Primary School Leaving Certificate Examination? She still has enough time to register, and I promise to make sure she passes.'

'Okay, she will take the examination but on condition that she stops seeing that woman. I am sure she has told you about her. Tell her. Let her choose between school and that prostitute.'

'Blessing, have you heard?' Peace asked.

'Yes.'

'Yes,' Joseph suddenly said. 'Let her do the holiday job and save the money for her school fees.'

And so the matter was settled.

As Blessing went to bed each night, she counted the days, waiting for the dawn of the next academic year. But as she waited, she burned the midnight oil in preparation for her ticket into secondary school. Close to her house, her friend and neighbour worked hard to sustain her business. Once the cover of night took over the skies Winifred, like all nocturnal creatures, set out to reap from the darkness.

It was the beginning of another academic year. Blessing's most treasured possession was her Primary School Leaving Certificate. Mozart had arrived from the village and was now part of the Tepo household. That was not the composition of Joseph's ideal home, but if having Mozart under his roof guaranteed his wife's protection when she went after knowledge, then he was ready to accommodate him. It was the beginning of another academic year and unlike those years in the village when she had watched 'Mosa' and Totso set out for school, she now was preparing to set out for school with Mozart.

'I know you are a bundle of nerves. Carrying a first school bag at nineteen, who would not be? But just trust me when I say that the tension knotted inside you will loosen the moment you walk into the school compound,' Winifred reassured her. 'Look at it this way: Just who do you think goes knowledge-hunting at an hour when nocturnal creatures start to invade the streets?' She smiled queerly. 'Trust me, Blessing. At 5.00 p.m., your school compound will be filled with students only as young as teenagers and as old as most of my clients.'

'Wini, this is a serious matter.'

'Just go. You will come back and tell me. Go before your husband returns and finds you in my house.'

Though it took some time for the sights that greeted her eyes to be transformed into credible signals in her brain, Blessing knew from the minute she walked into the school compound that she had her place among the knowledge-seekers. Her newly established birth certificate in her hand, she completed the registration formalities. The classroom beckoned. She walked into it feeling very much at home. However, victory in the first battle was a prerequisite to face the second: How was she going to speak in front of so many strangers? To diminish the risk of becoming a stooge, she chose to keep her eyes and mouth hidden from the teacher by sitting as far as possible from his or her front-room kingdom. Distance did not solve her

problem, for the English language teacher walked in, introduced himself, and asked the fifteen students to do likewise starting with, ‘the girl at the back.’

Blessing looked behind her. The wall looked back. She looked at Mozart sitting four benches away. He nodded his encouragement.

‘I ...’ she muttered and then fell silent as though all other words had suddenly sprinted from her brain. She shyly cleared her throat and made another attempt: ‘I ... I am Blessing, Blessing Tepo.’

The first thing she did the following morning after Joseph took off for work was to run to Winifred’s door. She knocked several times but got no answer. She walked to the widow and peeped but found nothing that would make the door open. With a heavy face, she walked back to her house.

How right Winifred had been about her finding her place. That aside, adult learning was difficult – having people insist on what she should do, when and how she should do it; having her opinion openly defied by a younger one; having her best plainly run down. It made her feel like a child learning to walk. At the end of that first day at school, she had realised it was either one of two things: give up and remain ignorant and poor or take down her ego and take up her abilities. Company in the ordeal was encouragement in her quest for the latter.

Soon Blessing was a one-week-old student. As her days of intellectual pursuit advanced to months, she began taking preferences for particular subjects. History was one of her favourites. At that point, November 1969, East Cameroon had been independent for nine years and West Cameroon for eight years. But what was Cameroon’s history? She learned about the arrival, to Cameroon, of Alfred Saker and other London Baptist Missionaries in 1845. The American Presbyterians had followed in 1879, while Roman Catholic missionaries, led by the German Bishop Vieter, had docked in 1884. By 1913, the Catholics had brought in nineteen missionaries and enrolled twelve thousand pupils in their schools. Though she loved them, these topics caused an uncomfortable stir in her for she had become too busy for church. Sunday had become her day of rest from school and chores.

When revising history, she loved to focus more the role of earlier Western visitors to Cameroon. As far back as the fifteenth century, long before the missionaries' arrival, explorers and traders had been visiting the coast of the country, among whom were the Portuguese explorers who had named the country *Rio dos Cameroes*, meaning the 'river of prawns' in reference to the Wouri River found in the present East Cameroon. Colonisers. They too had been among those eager to dip their roots into the rich and fertile continent. There were Germans, who had lost the country with the First World War, and later the French and British, who had ruled the partitioned land first as League of Nations territories and then as United Nations trust territories. Each of the three colonisers had come with a different system of government and a different name for the country: *Kamerun*, *Cameroun* and *Cameroon*, respectively. These stories about the early Western visitors often left Blessing with a smile.

Had she not been digging into Peace's books, this history of the white man would have amazed her. Indeed, she had been dumbfounded when she had first read about Cameroon's history. Suddenly, the white man advanced from the loner grappling with grave problems, past the man whose only relation lived in the pages of a magazine, and the one whose race came alive through television images, to a man whose history was deeply rooted in her continent and even her country. What had stunned her most was the knowledge that his ancestors had migrated from her continent.

'I told you that the white man still had many secrets from you,' Peace had said.

'I wonder when the white man would cease to amaze me.' Blessing had replied after a prolonged period of silence.

Today, she was not reading Cameroon and world history simply for pleasure; she was studying it for marks. The first history test was not easy at all. The questions seemed to change and become more complicated the moment she realised some of her classmates had temporarily tattooed their laps and arms with facts and historic figures. She looked at her blank answer sheet and was tempted to follow their example by peeping into her notebook, but then it occurred to her that if she would not take that risk alone and out of

her own initiative, then no need to take it with a group. No need to follow a group where if caught, everyone would try to claim innocence or reduce the weight of any resulting punishment by placing the blame on others. Better be caught doing something you believe in than something you have been dragged into – that was her first street lesson.

‘You have to be streetwise,’ Winifred had always urged her.

Officially, Blessing and her evening school classmates were in form three. They had four years to prepare and take the secondary school certificate examination, which normally required six years of secondary school studies. With an average of three hours instead of the habitual daily input of at least six, one of the keys to transforming this shortcut into a successful mission was hard work; assiduity and determination were others. Doubly encouraged by her outstanding performance and fierce competition from some of her classmates, Blessing’s inspiration mounted to the point where it was unmatched, such that even her pregnancy, six months after enrolment, did not trim her resolve. Her accomplishments so impressed her husband that he hastened to take her to court to legalise the ‘Tepo’ name. To share with their close and extended families, they decided to do the ceremony in Nchumuluh. Those in the village expressed their joy at the marriage and pregnancy by offering the couple four live chickens. Auntie Angela made it known at every opportunity that sleep had become sweeter since the legalisation of the union. Though Pastor Arrey and other Church elders constantly repeated that they were waiting for their turn to rejoice, they acknowledged that a civil marriage, being one step closer to a Christian wedding, was better than a *knock door* and tradition marriage. Their immediate concerns, however, were that Blessing become a committed Christian and get her to transform her husband from a Catholic non-churchgoer to a Pentecostal convert.

The baby boy came in 1970, after Blessing’s twentieth birthday. The event also coincided with her sixth year in Yaoundé and third anniversary of marriage. By this time, Joseph had saved enough not just to buy a motorbike but also to move his family out of the plank house to the now completed concrete three-bedroom apartment in

their compound. Still excited over the self-contained house complete with tiled bathroom and toilet, kitchen and three bedrooms, Blessing often ran to Winifred, once Joseph left for the office, with the latest thrilling realisation: 'It really feels good to be a mother and better, to be a mother in a new house. The baby's cot leans on our bed just like a baby leaning into its mother. The master bedroom is too small by Auntie Angela's standards but it is large enough to accord me private space. With my clothes and accessories occupying two of the three compartments in the wardrobe and my shoes fitted into a shoe rack hanging behind the door, I feel like a real married woman. I now have an Auntie Angela-like bedroom. What is lacking to complete my vision of the house of a Mrs. is a dining table capable of seating at least six people.'

Some new pieces of furniture had also accompanied the Tepos on the journey to the new house. A set of four armchairs and a coffee table had taken the place of the cane-chairs; a dining table with four seats occupied the large space opposite the kitchen door; and a new bed had moved into the master bedroom while the former one had moved into the third bedroom. Also, Joseph's bunk bed had found a place where it could stand on its feet rather than lean against a wall as though its limbs were not up to the task. While waiting for the designated occupants, the children's room had been set aside to lodge female guests.

As tradition would have it Blessing's mother, Nkem, soon travelled to Yaoundé to welcome the baby. Customarily, the parents of a newborn would send to the village for a name, but since Nkem had made the journey from the village, they assumed she had carried along the extra baggage.

'I have come here to teach my Fatti how to wash the baby,' Nkem said on the evening she arrived. They were all in the parlour with Blessing sitting in-between her mother and husband on the sofa. 'When I look at you, Fatti, I am very happy because I never knew that you would get married someday. Today you are not only married but you have brought your brother to live with you. I am very happy and proud of you.' She tapped Blessing's lap. 'When I look at your husband, my body fills with joy. I feel so much joy inside me. It just

moves inside my body, from my head to my feet. It is too much that I do not even know what to do with it.' She looked down at the baby in her arm. 'All I can say is that I thank God for him. I thank God for your husband, because he came and pulled you out of that hole and made the light to shine on your face. This child that I carry in my arms now –' she rocked the baby '– I will return him to your husband's family. Because of the good things which your husband has done for you, we have decided in the village that we name this child Kamucheu after his father.' She paused for a second. 'To that name we will add Temkeu, which is the name of Fatti's father, the head of my compound. I thank both of you for the wonderful thing you have done by bringing such a beautiful child into this world. Even though Fatti is no longer by my side, I do not worry because I know that I will always have her in this child. I know that the time will come when this child will come and spend the holidays with me in the village. And each time I send him to go and fetch water and give me to drink, I will remember my Fatti.' She paused again and stared at the prop of her old age. 'May God bless this house and everyone who lives here. May our Father in heaven bless this house with many more children. May God bless both of you. May God ...'

Blessing smiled a strained smile. It would have been impolite to interrupt her mother's continuous speech with a comment, and it would have been impolite to stay aloof in the face of such effusion.

Joseph beamed with pride. He was sitting on the sofa, his hands placed possessively behind Blessing's back as though to tell his mother-in-law, 'You brought her into the world, but she now belongs to me and has the duty of bringing my children into the world.' Who could blame him? He was the head of a family, living in a comfortable house, married to his first choice, who had just done him the honour of bringing forth a successor, who had been named after his father by his mother-in-law.

Nkem stayed for a month. She was there when her grandson, her fifth, went to bed and when he woke. Whenever she heard the baby's nocturnal cries, she would get out of her room, plaster her ears to the door of the master bedroom and soon start to pacing up and down the corridor until the crying completely ceased. In the morning, she

would confront Blessing and accuse her of sleeping more than the child. 'Why did you leave the child to cry so much at night? Do you want devils to steal his voice?'

'Mama, leave that talk,' Blessing would say in defence, fastening the wrapper tied above her breast to cover her nightgown. 'How can we know the child is awake if he does not cry?'

'You are right; but he does not need to cry for one hour. There are too many evil people outside at night.'

'Mama, such people exist only in the village. The kind of thing which you have in your head does not happen here in the city.'

'You see, I had said that I did not want to come here. I have not even stayed for up to two market weeks and I already hear you talking like Fr. Max.'

Blessing would laugh out aloud. The pattern was repeated day after day with Nkem cursing the lifestyle of the city dwellers and Blessing laughing and defending. Mozart always watched in amusement.

Anyone who was there to see Nkem off at the motor park could easily tell it was with great relief that she boarded the Bafoussam-bound bus. As full as her luggage was of little goodies from the city, so full was her being of tales to narrate to those who would gather in her hut in the week following her return. Those days when Makam had been on the seat of honour seemed just like yesterday.

With Nkem's departure, life in the Tepo's house returned to normal, the best demonstration being that Joseph had an opportunity to hold his son in his arms when he returned from work – a privilege denied him in the days of Nkem. 'Why are you crying non-stop?' he would often ask the baby. 'What is wrong with you? If only you could tell me! Would you still cry if you could talk?' he would ask as he rocked the baby up and down. 'Of course! Women cry.' After several unsuccessful attempts to stifle Temkeu's screams, Joseph would hand him to Mozart.

Mozart had proved to Blessing he was much more than just a brother. He was there when she left school at 8.30 p.m. and there when she sat on the table to do her homework, assisting her as he had done during her pregnancy and immediately after childbirth. As

expected, he had grown alongside his host family, from sleeping in the living room on a spare mattress, which went into hiding at the sight of day, to having a room to himself. Though free from competing with chairs for space, he still did not have space all to himself since he had to share his room with male visitors, mostly Joseph's friends on transit and in-laws from both families.

Winifred Mbile had moved into the Tepo's former house at the same time when her association with Blessing had moved out of her life. Joseph had eventually found out about their forbidden friendship. On his request, Aunt Angela had stepped in and, like a sharp sword, severed the Blessing-Winifred bond.

The university student still lived in her room but this time with her husband. Her life was a reminder to Blessing of how far she herself had come. Each time she saw her, she wondered if she was she once like her, crammed in a single room with her man. Day after day, as she walked to and from the kitchen and bathroom with food and a toilet bag respectively, she surely went about the dream to someday live in a bigger house. She surely also yearned for the day when she would return from the market with four shopping bags instead of the one which she often effortlessly swings along.

When Blessing's eyes fell on Winifred's closed door, she confessed that it was difficult to avert her eyes when she noticed she who had given the most invaluable advice of her life. Who knows how far she would have gone had people allowed their flame to burn. She hoped Joseph and religion were savouring their victory.

The excitement over the new baby and new house over, Blessing returned to her studies, this time to a new class. Yet a few months on, everyone could tell she had a man who kept her awake once the lights in the classroom went out. The son came in 1972 as she moved to the next class. 1972 was also a very significant year in the country's political history. In a referendum East and West Cameroonians voted to drop the federal system. The country adopted the name United Republic of Cameroon from the Federal Republic of Cameroon. That year the country also hosted the African Nations Cup for the very first time. A stadium had been constructed at the site of the football field in Omnisport: the Ahmadou Ahidjo Stadium. Joseph

never took Blessing to watch any of the matches with the excuse that she was a nursing mother.

That second son was named Mopokou after Blessing's late great-grandfather, for during her eight month of pregnancy, something happened that finally fitted the missing piece in the puzzle of her encounter with Mefo's father. It might have taken twelve years and it might have been the solution to a long-buried problem, but the event did more than just resolve the mystery of her life. It revealed more about the pedigree of the man she had married and elaborated the role of the ancestors in her life.

'What is wrong with you? You have been gloomy all morning,' Joseph asked Blessing, who had not moved since she had slumped into the sofa more than two hours ago.

'Did I ever tell you I had died?'

'What are you talking about?'

'I guess I was too scared I would miss out on my last chance of securing a husband.'

Joseph moved the confidence he had placed on his feet to his buttocks, sitting as far away from his wife as possible. He picked up the calendar on the coffee table and used his forefinger to trace the months. He stopped at November.

'We are not in April, and the first day of the month is far behind us.' He looked at his wife, probably hoping to find something resembling a smirk on her face. She was cold and distant. 'So tell me; who or what did I marry?'

'You married a human being who had had a view of the world beyond.' Even as she spoke she did not stir. It was as if paralysis had gripped her entire body, permitting solely movement of her lips muscles.

'Tell me, my dear wife;' Joseph teased, 'did you see my late father?'

'No, I saw Saha T'pune; rather, I saw my late great-grandfather who sent me to Saha T'pune.'

‘You saw who?’ Joseph inclined towards his wife, his anxiety about her instantly forgotten.

‘My great-grandfather. He—’

‘No! No! Not your grandfather, the other name. Please tell me I did not hear well.’

At the sound of the name ‘Saha T’pune’, Joseph got up and started pacing around the parlour with his hands on his head. Anyone who saw someone in that posture knew something drastic had happened or was in the process of happening.

‘This is not true. ‘Joseph brought his hands down but only long enough to convey another sign of distress: a loud clap. ‘There is really no running away!’ The words slipped out of his mouth, barely audible.

It was Blessing’s turn to be surprised. She had skipped from the sofa and was now standing behind him. ‘Joe, what is the matter? Do you know Saha T’pune?’

At the mere mention of the name, Joseph jolted from mental stupor. ‘Come and sit down.’ He pulled Blessing back to the chair, almost violently. ‘Now tell me all you know. How did your ancestor get in contact with that man? What does the man want from you? Why did you not ever tell me you knew that man? Why did you not tell me you are a zombie?’

‘I am not a zombie! Secondly, if you really know Saha T’pune, then you will know he died a long time ago when my parents were still children.’

‘But you should have told me you knew his name or had something to do with him.’

‘How would I have known that you knew him? When I came back from the other world, my parents and the village elders did all they could to find out why I had been sent to a dead man. Their efforts never produced any concrete results. For once, even the diviners had no answers. That happened twelve years ago. I had completely buried that incident and that name until last night.’

‘Tell me! What happened last night?’

‘I had a dream.’

‘What dream? Did you see your great-grandfather again?’

‘No, I simply heard the name ‘Saha ‘Tpune’ being repeated over and over again.’

Joseph clapped his hands again and then exclaimed in local parlance, ‘Bad luck meet up me!’

Now obviously concerned, Blessing said very gently, ‘You are acting strangely. Do you know something about the man?’

‘Who are you to ask me that kind of question?’ Joseph disappeared into their bedroom and emerged a few minutes later with the keys of his bike in his hands. He did not say a word to Blessing. He just walked past the chairs, past her and out through the door. Five hours went by before she laid eyes on him again. This time, even without her demanding any answers, he started providing them.

‘One of my grandfathers – I have forgotten which great in line-up though I think it is the most recent – once borrowed a cow from Saha ‘Tpune’s grandfather, a cousin of his. My ancestors were renowned cattle owners so no one can understand why he had to borrow a cow. Anyway, when ‘Tpune’s grandfather died suddenly, my great-grandfather never returned the cow, which was Saha ‘Tpune’s inheritance. ‘Tpune’s father had died prematurely, leaving the baby boy. Since then negligence has kept that debt in my family.’ Joseph paused for a while. ‘When I look back now, I realise that since then many of my kin have died under suspicious circumstances. Those who have not died have hardly had peace and always had lots of ill luck. Look at all the trouble that has come from one stupid cow!’ He sighed.

Blessing slowly slid from the chair to the carpet. ‘So it was you? So it was because of you that I came back? I now understand that things could never have worked out between Angu and me. Did the ancestors also have a part in my father’s reluctance to bury me? The power of the gods is unrivalled. Thank you, Mefo.’

‘Stop talking about the past. Just imagine how much I will spend now because of one stupid cow.’

‘It can be a stupid cow but it was someone’s life,’ Blessing said softly. ‘But why me? Why could your grandfather simply not transmit the message to you or someone else in your family? Why did he have to use my grandfather?’

‘Your great grandfather.’

‘Whatever. I am fed up with those people.’

‘Unfortunately we cannot understand how the ancestors work. The important thing is that the message has reached me.’

‘But why didn’t your family members repay the debt in the first place, especially given the misfortune they were experiencing?’

‘No one could tell that the cow was behind the misfortune, not even the diviners whom my uncles visited on several occasions. I guess that is why the ancestors had to step in.’

Blessing suddenly pulled Joseph’s hand, fastened it in hers and raised her voice in prayer: ‘In the mighty name of Jesus! Lord, I want to thank you because you are the Creator of all things. It is written in your Word that where two or three are gathered in your name, you are in their midst. Yes, Jesus, I want to glorify and thank you for you having revealed hidden things to your children. You have opened our blind eyes. You have challenged the devil and shown us your face. You have...’

Joseph just kept his eyes and mouth open, staring at his wife until she said the last word. She then lifted her head and stared at him as though she expected him to do or say something.

‘Amen,’ she finally said and then continued: ‘I am going to Nchumuluh tomorrow. My family needs to know about this.’

‘We are going to Nchumuluh tomorrow. We need to offer a sacrifice to Saha T’pune’s spirit and then repay the debt to his family. Today, my father, head of our family, is in no situation to repay such a debt. Everything comes back to me. If I want peace in my family, I think it is time to make good the bad debt. My uncle and I have just visited some soothsayer who has ordered me to pay back the debt. I need enough money. They may ask me to buy two cows – you know those elders love such reparation issues. I may also have to feed the entire T’pune clan. I am off to see the president and treasurer of the Nchumuluh *njangi*. I hope I would be able to get a loan.’

The door closed and he was gone. She walked into the room and started preparing their baggage for the journey of undetermined length. They had time on their side since Joseph was on leave.

Another trip to Nchumuluh, especially on this particular

occasion, met another visit to Tchafo's shrine. Blessing knew exactly what awaited her upon arrival. She was going to accompany her father to Tchafo, who would be expected to tell them how the revelation was to affect her life henceforth. Though the protection phase always came last, it could never be forgotten.

But why could Tchafo not provide explanations? He always went only as far as protecting. How efficient was protection when the victim did not understand the threat? Why could he not explain how the ancestors worked? Mefo's father had waited for another generation before revealing the mystery about Saha T'pune. He had come with medicine for Mefo's illness and after so many years, he had come again with medicine to heal the division between two families. Maybe these things were indeed higher than Tchafo.

Could there be an encounter with Tchafo without one with Fr. Max? Even when she did not desire or plan it, fate usually put Fr. Max in her path. It would be interesting to know what he had to say concerning the recent developments in the story of her life. Maybe he was no longer in Nchumuluh considering the recent developments in the Catholic Church. Nchumuluh was no longer under the Diocese of Buea but the newly erected Diocese of Bamenda with seat in Saint Joseph's Parish, Mankon.

By 1980, when Joseph was leaving to assume service in Douala where he had been posted as a police inspector, the household had received three additional members. A baby girl Angelina had been born the previous year and two of Joseph's nieces had moved in to help with the day-to-day care of the three children now aged ten, eight and one. Two teenage girls, two school age boys, one nursling, and an adult, Mozart – that was the composition of the household of the thirty-year-old woman walking in the shoes of Blessing Tepo.

Blessing's educational pursuit had also recorded some successes. The secondary school certificate in her pocket after five rather than four years, she had set out to own a high school certificate, which had come after three other years of hard work. A one-year break from school had been well-deserved. With Peace still on her heels, Blessing had soon returned to school, a professional one this time. After a few years of secretariat studies, she could now punch at a typewriter with the speed of fifty words per minute, write official letters, file documents and perform other administrative duties. The world of jobs now stood open to her. The jobs came at her but she stepped aside to allow them to pass. She was after one which assured a specific salary and which came with a contract that would allow her enough time at home with her children.

Who could have thought Fatti Ashi would one day be choosing jobs? She often marvelled at how far she had come. She could afford to pick jobs since she had a spare purse. At the end of each month, she went to the Post Office and collected the sum of fifty thousand Francs earmarked for house rents and family upkeep. Joseph took charge of the major financial engagements when he visited his family.

Through his spontaneous financial contributions, Mozart was also proving to be very helpful to Blessing. After obtaining his high school certificate, he had enrolled in the University of Yaoundé. Like every other university student, PhD or not, he received a monthly stipend, thanks to which he had moved into a room in the student

residential area. However, when Joseph had been transferred to Douala, Blessing had pleaded with him to return and provide the security of having a man under the roof. She, like everyone else, knew it was just a matter of time before he again moved out, this time to start his own family. How she dreaded that day!

For one who had dedicated the last twelve years of her life to studying and home management, Blessing Tepo turned out to be a committed professional as well – she eventually received a job offer good enough for her ‘yes’. So apart from being Mrs Tepo, she now also bore the title of Administrative Secretary at Cameroon Insurance Company Ltd. As her first month of work ended, she started falling into constant bouts of edginess whenever she heard her colleagues discussing payday and Christmas.

How was she going to share out her pay? Tradition stated that a child’s first salary had to go to her parents for blessings. The situation was complex for a child like her who had several parents, several people who had helped her climb the ladder. To demonstrate to her children what it means to have a mother with purchasing power – that was her intended Christmas gift to her children. But how could she fulfil it when her December salary was also her first?

One hundred and twenty thousand Francs was much money for a woman who had never before had a dime to her name. Yet with a household of seven occupants, an out-station husband, a deserving aunt and her family, and a polygamous family back in the village, the sum ended up providing solutions to just a tithe of the problems looking up it. As a way out, she decided to remit her entire pay to her parents and then borrow from the Nchumuluh *njangi* to meet other needs. Part of the money from the *njangi*, she divided into three envelopes: one for her husband in appreciation for his support, one for Auntie Angela and Uncle Polyandrew, and the other for Mozart, her favourite brother. The balance was for her children – to buy Christmas clothes and gifts and prepare some delicacies. All said and done, it felt good to earn her own money, to have her name written on it.

On the last Monday before Christmas, Blessing, like all her colleagues, walked out of the office with a big smile. The surprise

Christmas envelopes offered by their employer were safely tucked in their handbags and pockets. That manna, as she called it, was her gift to herself, her very first gift to herself. She set out on a shopping spree which she hoped would be the beginning of the replacement of her wardrobe which until then had been handpicked by Joseph.

As she scouted about Lebanese and Greek shops in downtown Yaoundé, Blessing giggled like an excited child. However, adult duties were on her trail. Picking out the perfect gift for every person – matching patterns with people, contemplating if a shirt would be one size too big or too small, dropping a yellow blouse in preference for a blue one because Peace looked better in blue, rummaging through racks yet walking out empty-handed because the dolls look too dull for Angelina! It would have been so much easier to envelop some banknotes and hand to Peace, yet that would also have been so much emptier, especially when she can do without the money. Would she love it? Would she say ‘how nice’ and never slip it over her body? Shopping was time-consuming, yet it was time spent loving.

But why did her hand keep heading for a mini skirt which no one on her list could wear? She now knew what had been weighing heavily on her mind ever since she wrote out names on her money. How could she dish out her harvest and forget the one person who had held her hand and showed her how to sow? Just how could she forget Winifred? Maybe it was time to re-establish their broken friendship. Winifred merited more than a simple gift acquired with her change, but at that point, anything was better than nothing. ‘Oh!’ Blessing sighed heavily. ‘It is already difficult shopping for simple people. What headache am I getting into by deciding to shop for someone like Winifred?’

After an afternoon of shopping away the equivalent of her monthly salary as though trying to make up for all decades of husbanding, Blessing finally stood on the kerb, shouting out her destination to passing taxis. The fifth taxi was going her way. She joined two passengers in the back seat and placed her shopping bags on her laps. When she arrived, she alighted and paid the taxi fare of 75 Francs.

‘Things are really becoming difficult in this country. You don’t

know what you do with money. You just realise it is not where you thought it was and that it is nowhere either, well except in your expenditure accounts,' she told Mozart as she handed him a parcel. 'And those paraplegic beggars at shop doors succeeded in making me feel guilty for walking on two fleshy legs. What else could I have done but give them the coins which should now have been secured in my purse? I almost even gave out my taxi fare!'

'Mama, should I keep this in your room?' Temkeu interrupted.

'It is for you, sweetheart. You all need to get used to the idea of your mother returning home with little gifts for you.'

'Thank you, Mama.' He hugged her.

During the rest of that afternoon, Blessing was rewarded with beaming faces. The children had really been joy to watch. First, there was the feeling and shaking of gift boxes; then followed the shredding of the wrappings; finally came the giggling and tattling as they admired and compared gifts. Such reactions were very far from Aunty Angela's who, concluding an envelope could contain only money, had simply offered a 'thank you'. She had not even been curious enough to check the amount, or if she had then she had put up a good performance of concealing her curiosity.

Blessing had had a pleasant afternoon but the easy part was over. She had to prepare for the moment when she would walk into Winifred's house and offer her the gift of a set of beautiful hairbrushes complete with hand mirror and some hairpins. It had taken thirty minutes of combing several shops for her to settle on that.

'I refuse to envisage her reaction. If I start contemplating, I will just bury the gift under my bed. Let me just go. Good luck, Blessing.'

Winifred. Though she had lived in various towns – Limbe, Douala, Buea – at various times, Yaoundé had always remained close to her heart. After seven years away, she had relocated to the city of her teens. Now she did not live so close to the Tepos but she lived not very far away. She had bought a house just across the street.

'What is this for? Payback? Or are you trying to buy me back?' Winifred asked, minutes later, as she accepted the parcel from Blessing.

‘It is just a gift to a friend.’

‘Friendship which is sensitive to roaming eyes? Friendship at your convenience? Friendship—’

‘Wini, please stop. Let us not go down that road. I can give you a hundred and fifty reasons or explanations why I had to pull back, but I don’t think that is necessary. I am no longer a naive girl. I am a woman who knows what she wants. I owe that to you.’ Blessing’s smile met a cold face. ‘Okay, I was foolish to allow—’

‘Cut the crap, Blessing. I have accepted your gift. What is the next step?’

‘Lunch on Christmas day.’

Christmas was one of the rare occasions when Blessing’s feet remembered the road to church. After the service the Tepo’s hosted a crowd composed of the children’s friends, Peace, Patience, some of Blessing’s colleagues and Winifred as guest of honour. Amidst enchanting conversation, they licked their fingers, swallowed and flushed the food down with wine, Jesus and the Holy Family all but forgotten.

The New Year of 1982 stood out because Joseph Tepo was posted back to Yaoundé after working in Douala for two years. The Tepo couple made serious plans for that year and the ones after, hoping to catch up on all the time lost. But in 1984, when ‘United’ was dropped from the name of the country, making it the ‘Republic of Cameroon’, Joseph was again assigned out of Yaoundé, this time to Garoua in the North Province. That Christmas Joseph consequently had other pressing issues constipating his mind.

By Christmas of 1986, Blessing too had other issues constipating her mind, issues which were so daunting they could not be calmed even by the excitement fever that had kept the nation ecstatic following the launching of Cameroon Television, the first TV station in the country.

When Joseph had taken off for Garoua, his family had known he would not visit on a weekly or fortnightly basis as he had done while in Douala. They understood that the two-day alternate bus and train journey to Yaoundé was tedious, and that the frequency of armed attacks on that route aggravated the situation. It was good for a

family to be united as often as possible, but it was better for a family to have a father and a reliable source of livelihood. Hence, the family unanimously agreed that he limit his visits to his yearly leave and other official visits. These summed up to approximately four annual visits. Yet, as year had followed year, even the four visits had become too demanding.

Back home friendship had also not been as readily available as Blessing would have loved. Winifred had so far proved to be present but unattainable. That afternoon, like a few before, they were sitting in Blessing's living room.

'How can you ask me to come and collect the magazine at 7.00 p.m. when you know you will not be in at that hour?' Blessing asked a little irritated.

'I know you very well, Blessing. Being greeted by a closed door is not what you are avoiding. Take me whole or leave me alone. I am going to sleep. I have a living to make while others sleep.'

While Winifred slept, Blessing spent the next three hours anywhere but in her living room where she was actually sitting. Almost everyone who knew her house has used her association with Winifred as an excuse to voice their hostile opinions on sex workers. Though she thought they were unjust in considering Winifred impure, she knew they had a point, the same one which had held her back from openly accepting Winifred. Whenever their conversations had drifted towards Winifred's professional life, she had always skilfully diverted the talk. Today, Winifred had laid the cards plainly on the table: 'Accept me wholly as a true friend or join the others and writhe your nose when I approach.'

Since that Christmas when she had offered Winifred an olive branch, she had always known the day would come when she would have to make good her claim of friendship. Now she had been put on a friendships test. But just how much of a friend was Winifred? Was she really a shoulder she could cry on? Or just an available companion who could make the noise necessary for her survival? Or a window into the true world of men? Or perhaps the voice of her conscience?

Blessing cursed herself for not seeking to answer these questions

before stretching out her hand. All she was certain of at that point was that though Winifred was what she was, her hurtful frankness and ‘dirty mind’, as Auntie Angela called it, were better than the false modesty of some colleagues and occasional church friends. All other factors aside, how could she again turn her back on the one who was at the genesis of the new life she now could not do without? How could she refuse to offer so little to the one who had offered so much at such a limited cost? For how long was she going to continue to please others to her detriment? On the other hand, if she decided to accept Winifred, on what grounds would she be doing it? Would it be returning a favour or really taking her for who she was?

Blessing got up from the sofa and carried Angelina, who had been sleeping in her arms, to the upper layer of the bunk bed in the girls’ room. She walked to her room and inspected her image in the mirror – one of the lessons Winifred had hammered into her head – and then walked out towards the road. Ten minutes later, she stood in front of Winifred’s door.

For all the nineteen years she had lived in that quarter, that moment was to go down in history as the first time she would knock on Winifred’s door after 6.00 p.m. At the onset of their friendship, Winifred had quickly understood that she did not approve of her stopping over en route for the streets. When it had happened, which always coincided with Joseph’s absence, they had started and finished their discussion outside the house. Joseph had eventually forbidden their friendship, but he had not stopped Blessing from, consciously or not, reacting to Winifred’s departure and arrival. Lying on her bed in the heart of the night, she had often heard Winifred crawl in. The lazy footsteps, the sound of keys dancing in a ring and finally that of a key being forced into a keyhole. From her estimates, the time had often been between 3.00 and 4.00 a.m., when she woke to check on the baby. In spite herself, she had silently commended Winifred for making the effort to return home before night retreated with its shielding darkness and for returning home alone, meaning she did whatever she did anywhere but in her home. As baby had followed baby, so had Blessing kept track of Winifred’s schedule. Then had come the day when Winifred had moved out. She had moved out of

Yaoundé and out of Blessing's life. She had stayed away for seven years. Blessing remembered the day news reached her that Winifred had moved back to Yaoundé and into a house she had bought on the other side of the road – in the same quarter but far enough to keep out the sounds and sights she so dreaded.

Blessing lifted her hand, hesitated for a few seconds, then rapped softly on Winifred's partially open door. 'Wini, it is Blessing. May I come in?' she asked once in the parlour.

'Sure, you know you are always welcome.'

Blessing turned the doorknob, pushed open the bedroom door and wondered why she could not have chosen a better moment.

'Come right in. I was just struggling to get this blouse together. Please give me a hand.' Winifred turned her bare back to Blessing.

'I see a green blouse there in your wardrobe,' Blessing said. 'Don't you think it would match better with your green poker trousers?'

'Shorts you mean or mini trousers? No, dear, I prefer this one. I have a hunch business would be good today if I put on this blouse. Just tie it up for me.' Winifred took another step backward, moving closer to Blessing.

Blessing reluctantly lifted her hands. When her fingers made contact with Winifred's bare back, she flinched but disguised it before it took on a more harmful form. After much effort, she brought the strings together such that they appeared in the shape of a blouse.

'Thanks, Ble. I am almost late. I have an appointment with a regular client. He called me this morning. The advent of the telephone has had an impact even in my line of business. I have told you to hurry up and get a phone installed in your house. Well, as I was saying, on a day like this, I don't have to hang out in nightclubs or other hot spots. I don't have to go looking for clients, some of who just waste my time and grant me neither of the two benefits of my profession. I have a couple of such regular clients. They ...'

Blessing watched silently as her friend, Winifred Mbile, recounted a typical day in her professional life. 'I don't pay entry into the nightclub; do you know that? If we are not there, the men with

spending power are not there. The truth is that all people who love nightlife have something in common. Do I look good?’ Winifred asked as she inspected her petite form in the full-length mirror. ‘It is time I replenish my wardrobe. I know you wonder if I don’t get tired of clothes, but you know that in this business, you always have to look good. You have to keep reinventing your image. Talking about the men, you have to be firm in your dealings with them. The regular client I mentioned once got on my nerves. In retaliation, I washed him with fine words,’ Winifred said proudly. ‘Don’t you want to know what I said to him?’ She threw Blessing an encouraging glance.

‘What did you say?’ Blessing asked reluctantly.

Winifred moved forward as though she were an actress auditioning for a role. Hurling her arm in the air, she said to an invisible opponent, ‘I thought you were a gentleman who loved to treat a lady right. I was wrong. You are a rascal who cannot define the word “gentleman”.’

‘What did he do?’

‘Imagine you go about with the raised shoulders of a big shot in the country, yet only to be so dry-cleaned by a woman like me. What would you have done in his place?’

‘Well, if I were really as arrogant as your man, then well ... I think I would have given you a dirty slap in exchange for your clean words – fine ones, did you say?’

‘You learn fast.’ Winifred lifted her hand to her face and caressed her right jaw lightly. ‘I still feel the pressure of his palm against my skin.’

Girlish giggling filled the room. For a while, both seemed to forget all about their differences. But the moment of bliss did not last long.

‘I am ready to go. Wish me “good luck” for the night.’ When no words were forthcoming, Winifred continued, ‘You don’t want to? Did I not always offer you many “good lucks” when you used to go for your exams?’

‘Don’t you think it is time you quit this ... this business?’ Blessing asked instead.

‘What would I leave it for when I have no other skills and neither

husband nor children?’

‘No one refused you children.’

‘I don’t have time for them.’

‘Once upon a time you gave me very good advice. I think it is time to reverse the roles. Have a child, Wini. A child will give you the kind of joy that your job will never give you. You are almost thirty-seven. Better take an important decision now. Your bank account is big enough to turn a child into a responsible person. So don’t give me that as an excuse.’

‘I will mull it over. But for this evening, I am still waiting for what I asked.’

‘Good luck, Wini, and take care.’

‘Thanks. I am sure today will be my best night ever. Ops! I almost forgot.’ Winifred retraced the steps from the bedroom door back to the dressing table, picked up a bottle of perfume and flushed her body. ‘This will go into my bag for refreshment.’ Meeting up with Blessing in front of the main door and without warning, she splashed some of the spray on her with the words, ‘You always smell flat.’

‘You are crazy, Wini. What have you done? Do you want my husband to fling me out through the window?’

‘Fling you out for enticing him by smelling good? You live in another world, an archaic one. Wake up, girl! Even if you don’t wear it for him, do it for yourself. Enjoy the good things of life. He offered you perfumes when he was wooing you. Now you are an old maid.’ Winifred looked at Blessing intently and said, ‘We are talking as though you even have a man waiting for you in your house. If you ask my opinion, I say that I don’t think your husband sits in his house in Garoua all day well, except in pleasant company. I know you will not want to hear this, but I think it is time you too go out and have some fun while waiting for his return. Let me go. I am almost running late. See you tomorrow, and again –’ she stretched out her hands, held Blessing’s and looked into her eyes ‘– thanks for coming.’

Blessing followed Winifred to the yard and then accompanied her with her eyes until she entered into her car and drove off. As she walked home, she lifted her arms to her nose and sniffed. ‘I really smell good. It’s been a while since I last smelled this good.’ She

smiled. 'Friendship, what is it all about anyway? And more important, what is it about men that puts us, women, in such states?'

Blessing had more reason to ask similar questions some months later, when Joseph came home from the North where he had spent the majority of the last two years to collect his belongings, all his belongings.

‘This marriage is over, Blessing. Don’t think this is a rash decision. It is not. I have carefully considered the matter and would have made room for polygamy, only I cannot accommodate two wives. I am practising what I preached when your aunt warned me about sticking to one wife.’

‘How could you even think of polygamy when we had forfeited that option?’ Blessing asked, stunned.

‘We signed that our marriage would be in accordance to the laws and customs of the Nchumuluh people. What do you think that means?’

‘Where are you heading?’

‘Where you know I will land.’

‘I don’t know what you are talking about and I don’t want to know. I—’

‘Whenever you are ready to face the truth all you need to do is go to your protective aunt,’ Joseph mocked. ‘Poly or mono, it does not matter. What matters is that—’

‘Don’t drag my aunt into ... into whatever it is you are talking about.’

‘You see, you would not even listen to me. —what matters is that I signed a renewable contract with you, meaning it always has been repealable. I just came to collect my stuff.’ He walked into the bedroom and started assembling his belongings.

Blessing met him in the bedroom. ‘So you really want to go. What about your children? You have not seen them for so long yet you want to walk in and out of your house without even asking about them?’ she asked in a quivering voice.

‘I know my children are spending the holidays in the village with your mother. When I want to see them I will not pass through you.’

When he noticed Blessing had her eyes fixed on him, he said, 'Pretend I am not here. Just go about your business as always. Before you know it I will be out of your way.'

Like a lunatic, Blessing flew to the bedside table, opened her handbag, picked up her purse and went past him like the wind. As she walked out of the house, Joseph called out, 'Don't bother to bid me farewell. I will have evaporated by the time you return.'

'Mefo. Mefo.' Blessing murmured as she stood at the kerb waiting for a taxi. Mefo had warned her that the pot inside which food is cooked always remains behind the fireside, that it never goes to the table. She had told her that men always leave the black pot and go and eat inside a clean plate. She had told her to keep her eyes open when she walked with men, if not they will use her to cook, but the very men will refuse to eat from her because she was too dirty. 'Mefo, you told me to think ahead of men,' Blessing said, 'but what did I do? I let Joseph move faster than me. Why did I not even realise that his absence and financial detachment were a portent of this horror that has been unveiled today?'

Entangled in her thoughts, Blessing remembered little of the taxi ride to Aunt Angela's house. It was Saturday and the two boys who now lived with her had gone for Bible Study in church. Her husband had gone to the Nchumuluh men's meeting, which was held on the first Saturday of each month. The environment could not have been more convenient since Aunt Angela was home alone.

'Ble, what is wrong with you? Why are you dressed as though some trouble chased you out of your house before you had time to take off that old *Kabba* or arrange the headscarf almost covering your eyes? Come and sit down? Are the children okay?'

'They are alright, Aunt,' Blessing said. She was now sitting next to her aunt on the sofa. 'Hm, Aunty ...' she clapped her hands and then wedged the left one between her lap and her chin to support the weight of her head.

'Ble, you scare me when you behave like that. What is it? Come out with it. Has anybody in the village died?'

'Aunt,' she said calmly 'go and bring that marriage certificate so we have a close look at it.'

‘So it is your husband?’ Aunty Angela sighed and leaned back into the chair. ‘Just yesterday I was telling some friends about your husband, describing him as an exemplary man even after nineteen years of marriage. But I should have known that a man who never complains is a man whose interest is elsewhere; and that the day he opens his mouth, the marriage gets seriously sick. Tell me—’

‘Aunty, just go and bring that marriage certificate.’

‘It must be something serious. What has he said or done?’

‘He wants to divorce me; DIVORCE ME! He wants to dispossess me of my right to be a wife!’

‘What?’ Aunty Angela screamed. ‘He wants to do what? Hey, Nkem! Hey, they will now say I took the child and sent her where she would bring shame to the family and the tribe.’ She bent her head, lost in her thoughts. ‘Tell me, Blessing —’ Aunty Angela lifted her head and took Blessing’s right hand in hers. ‘— what did you do to make him say such a thing?’

‘What did I do? What did I do?’ Blessing yelled. ‘What could I have done when I have not seen his face for more than a year? What could I have done when I have not received a Franc from him for some months? And if it is not about sex and money, about what would I cause trouble? That woman has turned my husband into a debauched man.’

‘Another woman! Yes, another woman.’ Aunty Angela shook her head. ‘If it is not about sex and money, it is about another woman. But you know, Ble, another woman should not be the reason why you should get into such a state. You need to understand that men are like that.’

‘Like how, Aunty?’ Blessing did not look as curious as she sounded. She looked furious.

‘They...they like other women. I mean to say that it is difficult for them to be faithful. It is for you, the chief woman, to understand that you are the queen while the others are servants who come and go.’

‘So you, a Christian woman, are saying that I should return home and wait while my husband moves from one skirt to another? That I should be patient until he finds his lost desire for me?’

‘That is not exactly what I am saying. The main issue here is that men are polygamous by nature. Village men are better because they acknowledge their basic instincts and act in the best interest of all women concerned. City men, on the contrary, are hypocrites who, in trying to deny their nature, end up aggravating an already complex situation. And those, like Joseph, who are unskilled in the art of womanising often land right in the centre of the pitfalls. Someone needs to talk some sense into that ex-ignored bachelor who is probably just flattered that another woman openly fancies him. Divorce? Have you ever heard of a divorced someone? And do you think it is because women don’t have differences in their marriages? Oh, they do! However, they stick to societal guides and accept that a normal man is the one with girlfriends. So you see, the man dips his dick here and there and the woman goes about with the respect and advantages of one who belongs. Both parties are happy and the ‘irreconcilable’ differences dissolve.’

‘Aunty,’ Blessing breathed deeply, ‘I am not here to hear you justify polygamy; and there is just one thing I need to know about monogamy. I signed outright monogamy, didn’t I?’

Aunty Angela became mute.

Blessing closed her eyes. She felt trapped with the truth. It felt like she was locked up with the cruel truth in the same tight enclosure. Yet all was not lost. She was not obliged to hear that truth. Two escape routes stood open to her. She could run through the door or change the topic of discussion.

‘I signed monogamy, didn’t I?’ Blessing repeated.

‘The laws and customs of Nchumuluh—’

‘I don’t believe this! So you knew about it?’ Blessing skipped from the sofa, tearing her hands out of her aunt’s. ‘The mayor explained, but I did not understand and I did not ask questions. Why did I not ask questions? Because I knew my aunt was there, and I knew my aunt understood, and I trusted my aunt. Oh, why had I not asked questions?’ Blessing stifled a sob. ‘It was the most important document in my life, yet I signed it without asking questions. I never read through before signing it and I never read it after the signing. As soon as we left the court, I gave my treasure to the person I trusted

most. My God! This is not true. Mefo told me to be wary of men but not women, not my family.'

'Look, listen to me, Blessing. Yes, I knew what contracting a marriage in Nchumuluh meant, but remember how you both insisted that you wanted your families in the village to be part of the festivities? Remember that you were already pregnant. Who knows if he wouldn't have postponed the signing indefinitely had I kept insisting on what I wanted. And don't forget you had a heavy debt on your head.'

'If such justifications salve your conscience, then fine; but nothing you say or do can make up for the fact that you kept me in the dark. You should have seen him spitefully spit out the fact in my face this afternoon, and all with your help.'

'Don't throw such disparaging remarks at me when I have explained things to you. It is not because you have a voice to talk today that you will ask me why I did not tell you. Indeed, what should I have told you? That you should refuse a civil marriage in Nchumuluh should your husband request such? You know it was only after much pressure and a pregnancy that he even accepted to take you to court? Back then, when you did not know what it meant to be a wife, how could you have known what was good for you? How—'

'That is what you tell me today, but I know you will never have approved such a situation had I been one of your daughters. Today you stand encouraging Pastor Arrey when he talks about a church wedding? You should be ashamed, Aunty.'

'Don't you talk to me like that, Blessing! And I hope you are not dreaming of an abject apology because you are not going to get one from me! Do you think you are the only woman to have signed such a marriage? For your information, many women in similar situations have had their marriages blessed in church.'

'That is because their husbands have never exploited the polygamy option open to them. I am the only woman whose husband has requested a divorce, both the clandestine and legal polygamies being too good for me!'

'I had told you several times to return to church but you would

not. You were too busy for church. Do you think we create time for church because we have nothing doing? The church is a place of moral support. It is a community which helps one weather the storms of life. It is a place which builds your trust in God.'

'But I went to church.'

'Only when it suited you. Pastor Arrey has always been asking after you.'

'Aunty please, I came here to talk about my problem not to listen to you bring up your pastor's problem.'

Silence fell as the two women weighed each other, iris to iris, eyeball to eyeball.

'Please just give me the piece of paper.'

'Let me fetch it.'

Those were the words which saw Blessing Tepo to the door, her marriage certificate scrolled in her hand. Anybody who knew the two women well knew it might be a while before they met in either's house. Though Aunty Angela was the only one at home, limiting the news to the two intended pairs of ears, both knew it was not to be long before the news spread as gist of the day in both households, in their church and beyond.

Once out of her aunt's house, Blessing did not look back, not even over her shoulder for a taxi. She walked seemingly oblivious of everything on her way: the noisy children just out from Saturday classes, the cars hooting around her in the dense traffic, the rowdy traders hollering for attention. She remained in her trance even as she walked by the stinking mountain of garbage. 'Had my problems started as shreds strewn about?' she asked herself. 'When I had done nothing, had they mounted to a heap? Had I sniffed disaster from a distance but refrained from going closer lest the scent stick on me? Had I seen it coming and turned away? Had I refused to smell my own fart? Had I closed my eyes, too scared to open them lest I give form to my nightmares? Where had I gone wrong?'

Bystanders and motorists stared at her with eyes which said they could use better sights than an insane woman talking to herself. That did not bother her at all. She barely noticed them. 'Two years ago,' she said in a thoughtful voice, 'that spot crammed with traffic had

been completely covered with tar. A pothole had formed, one morning. As the council and government had ignored it, it had gained a little depth each day. Today, it is a spot which slows down the city and consequently takes hostage the country's economic, political and cultural development. Tomorrow, it will be a crater which will claim a life. What had claimed my marriage?’

Blessing walked all the way but never arrived because each path she took led everywhere but to her intended destination. When she finally remembered the way home, she got there to discover that Joseph had indeed moved out of their house and probably out of her life. She walked into their bedroom and fell face-flat across their bed. They had been two on that matrimonial bed, but unlike polygamy, where her Angu had slept with other women, someone had been sleeping between her and Joseph. Yes, an invisible someone had been sleeping between them and that someone had succeeded in pushing her off that bed.

She lifted her head and looked around the room. The shelves which once bore Joseph's belongings, his shaving cream and shoe polish, now displayed only the circular and triangular shapes of their bases against the dusty wooden surfaces. Only some days ago she had been trying to create space in the overcrowded room. Now the walls seemed to have moved further apart, creating a huge and silent structure. A deep urge to remind herself that she was alive filled her. She needed to convince herself that she had not died with Joseph's half of the room. ‘How right Mefo had been,’ she said in loud but quivery voice. ‘And where Mefo had stopped Winifred had continued, feeding me with tales about the married men who constantly sort her services.’ A deep sigh followed.

‘I love you, Blessing,’ Winifred had once told her, ‘that is why I am telling you that the day might come when you would be introduced to the woman who shares your husband's life. Prepare your heart, my dear, such that you will not pass out the day his girlfriend mockingly points you out to her pals given that she, most likely, would be garnished with gold which will glitter exaggeratedly beside your bronze.’

‘Yes, people had warned me about the challenges of marriage.’

Blessing rolled away from Joseph's side of the bed. 'People had warned me about marriage but not this. Divorce! Nobody had warned me about it. Nobody had seen it coming.'

'What should I do, Mefo? Where are you to show me the way?' Blessing got up from the bed, pulled a drawer and took out Mefo's pipe. She carried the pipe with her to the armchair in the sitting room, placed it on the table across her and stared at it for a long while.

'Why had you not shown me a sign that would have prevented me from marrying a man who would later throw his manhood?' She felt so hot inside that even on this very cold and rainy evening, she sat in the chilling parlour without any pullover or protective clothing. She wore just her old, flimsy *Kabba*. Joseph had given her the cloth with which she had sown that *Kabba* just after she gave him Angelina. How she had hated it! If only he could reappear and offer her clothes in exchange for silent complains.

She could suddenly smell it: his freshly brewed black coffee. The scent, rising with the steam from the teacup, blends with that of Queen of the night. She inhales from the dining table, where she is helping the children with their homework. Joseph is sitting on the sofa, sipping his coffee and reading a copy of *Cameroon Tribune*. No! It is morning and he has just joined them at the dining table. He has taken his place at the head of the table and is taking his coffee with condensed milk. She can hear him revving up his bike as he prepares to head to the office. The sound is fading, fading. It is gone. He is gone. Joseph is gone.

A couple of hours had gone by since Joseph had walked in with his request for divorce, but for the first time it dawned on her that she was going to be alone. All her life she had had people around her, people looking out for her. In the village, there had been Mefo and her father, who were soon replaced by Aunty Angela and Peace. When Joseph had stepped in, she had entrusted complete responsibility of her life to him. He thought for her; he planned for her; he almost lived in her place. Though Winifred had urged her to be more participative in her life, Joseph had remained her pillar. Now he had walked away and left her alone. The tears ran freely down her

eyes. She made no effort to stop them or wipe them off. She simply allowed them to flow like a river carrying away debris from a storm.

Through the tears Blessing looked on the wall, her gaze focused on the family photo. Next to it hung a picture that symbolised the heart of the past nineteen years of her life. The photographer had succeeded in looking past the smiling faces of the man in white lace *jumper* and woman in white lace *boubou* to capture the sly glance Joseph was throwing at Blessing. Translated into words the glance could go: 'I want you; just you wait until these people disperse.' Where had all that gone – the pleasure of giving in to his exuberant demands that night after the court ceremony? How could he suddenly have forgotten such days and moments when they had been so close air could not pass between them? Where were all those who had come from far and near to tap their shoulders, pledging their support? At that time, she could not have imagined that things might someday degenerate to the point of requiring third-party intervention. When she had met Joseph in 1967, people had surrounded them. Now in 1987, she did not know whom to turn to. Smart as he was he had returned to the North immediately, knowing few would risk their lives by taking the long and risky journey just to persuade him to return to his wife and family. The North was indeed a long way off, especially as at that precise moment, she could not even summon the strength to walk to her bedroom. Her body could not endure the journey and neither could her soul, the place. She stretched out on the sofa, picked up the pipe and finally told Mefo what she wanted: 'I know you did not like men, and that you had warned me about them. However, for the sake of my children, give me back my husband. I just want my family back together.'

Before closing her eyes, she said a short prayer: 'Jesus, I know divorce is not my portion. It is against your Laws. I count on you to give me back my husband and my family. Amen.'

As anyone could have predicted, given the uncommonness of divorce, Pastor Arrey screamed and Blessing's mother collapsed. Not surprising, her father took her to Tchafo the very day she stepped on Nchumuluh soil.

'If you had come only a few days earlier, I would have prevented

your husband from offering his manhood to another woman. Only a few days earlier!’ Tchafo emphasised.

‘But, Tchafo, when we consulted you about this marriage did you not say that the gods had reassured you that it was going to travel on a smooth road? So how come we are now walking on such a rough road?’ Blessing challenged the diviner.

‘During those many years, did you not feel like a woman who lived with a real man? Did your husband not cover you like an umbrella? I do not live in your house. So you tell me. Did you suffer during that time?’

‘The last two years have not been easy ones and—’

‘—there is no marriage without trouble.’

‘That is not what I was going to say.’

‘What is hanging on your tongue is not important. You see, it is not for nothing that we ask you people in the city to come and collect blessings from the village, that you should return home during the year to thank the gods. But you people close your ears to our words of wisdom. And when you do not come to get protection, it becomes very easy for other people to put harm in your way. People become jealous of your marriage and decide to step in the middle to spoil it, people like your aunt in Yaoundé. You know that her heart was very heavy when a man chose you over her daughters. Then again, you added two to the population of the world while her first daughter was still waiting for a man.’

‘But all her children are now married. They even have children of their own.’

‘That does not change the story that a man admired and wanted you while her girls watched from the back of the house.’

‘You heard that? You heard that with your own two ears?’ Temkeu asked. ‘I had said that that woman was not good. I did not sleep well the day she came with the news that she wanted to take you to Yaoundé. Now see the kind of thing which has happened?’

Blessing did not offer a word. It was as though her ears were too stiff to trust what she had just heard, her mind too numb to think. She simply stared at her father as though he were speaking in some alien tongue.

‘Do not look at me that way!’ he scolded. ‘I had told you. Do you see the kind of thing which has come out of that your Yaoundé?’

‘This is not the time to argue. Tchafo stated. ‘As I said if she had come only a few days earlier, I would have prevented her husband from throwing his manhood.’

‘But since your big eyes had seen what was going to happen, why did you not tell me to send for her from Yaoundé? Why, Tchafo?’

‘Now that she is here, let me use my big eyes and big hands to do what I can do for her.’

‘Yes, you have spoken with wisdom. Is there something you can really do to prevent my daughter from bringing shame to the family and the village?’

‘Yes. First, I will mark her so that the gods’ protection follows her. Then, I will give her a special bundle to place on her husband’s path. Once he crosses over it, that woman will flow out of his being, and he will return to his wife and children.’

‘Just do whatever you can to make her man take her back, even as the fifth wife.’

Before both men realised that she had slipped out of the shrine, Blessing was already on the path back home.

‘Fatti, Fatti, what is wrong with you? Where are you going?’ Temkeu asked when he caught up with her some distance away. ‘I thought you came all the way to see me in Nchumuluh because you want your man back?’

‘I came to tell you and the family my problem.’

‘Tell us so that we do what with the problem? Eat it? I abandon my business and carry myself to search for a solution to your problem and you run and abandon your problem with me?’

‘If what Tchafo has said is the only solution he can come up with, I prefer to go back with my problem bending my back. I was born with Tchafo’s blade on my skin, but I cannot point one solution born of his scars. I have never been to the North, yet he wants me to go into some woman’s house to place an amulet on my husband’s path? Does he know what kind of talismans or magical bundles the Northerners have? What makes him think he is more powerful than their diviners and witchdoctors? Please —’ Blessing held up her hands

‘– I only want my husband back. I don’t want to die. Remember that I still have three children who look up to me.’ With those words, she took to her heels, not giving him the chance to say another word. She stopped at the compound but only long enough to assemble her belongings and swallow a few words of her mother’s wisdom.

‘When a man keeps quiet, either he is very satisfied or very worried. When you get your man back – I trust God you will – you should be able to interpret his silence and start making it talk before it gets too silent and starts acting instead. Just go; if you have any serious problem, I will come to Yaoundé so that together we see what we can do. And when you go, remember to pray and ask Mama Maria to show you the way.’

Blessing was in the next car out of Nchumuluh. When she was not dozing off, she was staring at the passing wind. Tchafo’s herbs had smelled awfully. The sight of grass blades emerging from clay pots had made her wince. Had it been that long since she had last stepped foot in his shrine? Tradition was so simple yet it did not promote self-growth since there is always somebody to blame for this or that misfortune. When it came to tradition, nothing happened by chance and every problem had a solution. But just how sustainable were those solutions? Not very, since she had been required to come for renewed protection every now and then. With each protection séance came a bill. Such were what ended up making tradition difficult and discouraging – the financial, physical and emotive energy dispensed towards unsustainable solutions.

Once in Yaoundé, Blessing boarded a Taxi for Shell Elig-Edzoa. As the taxi slowed to the dictate of the red light at Carrefour Elig-Edzoa, something made her change her destination. She paid the taxi fare, now 100 Francs, alighted and then boarded another taxi bound for Etoug-Ebge, across town, where her aunt now lived.

When she walked into the Niba’s residence, she could not tell what surprised her aunt more: her return like the prodigal daughter – she had not stepped foot in that house since their violent encounter of two weeks ago – or the travelling bag slung on her shoulders at 6.45 p.m. Aware that her aunt was waiting for an explanation, she made up a message from her mother: ‘Mama says I should tell you

that Thomas in Tchusa needs some financial assistance to enable him take his wife to the hospital.'

'She had sent the message before, and I have already sent him some money.'

'Maybe she forgot; age, you know.'

'Yes.'

Both smiled, weighing each other like two strangers meeting for the first time.

When Blessing's gaze moved to her aunt's head, she noticed the white hair sprouting above her temple. How old is she? Late fifties? It seemed only like yesterday, those days when they had been jumping about in the girls' room. Here she was, mother of three. Patience was a mother of five and Peace had one toddler.

'How is everyone in the village?'

'They are all fine. They all send greetings.'

Silence.

'In fact, I should be going. You know it is getting late. I just stopped to deliver the message.'

'You should rush home and see those kids. They must have missed you greatly. Wait. Let me give you some cakes for my darlings.'

As she walked to the road to wait for a taxi, Blessing asked herself, 'Who am I to believe? Tchafo and my father or Auntie Angela? Maybe God! Yes, it is time for God.'

The first rains roused dormant dust particles, filling the air with the scent of dust. The second rains soaked into the earth. The third rains transformed the earth into the red mud characteristic of Yaoundé, which lumped beneath shoe soles to increase heels. By the heart of the rainy season, floodwaters were streaming into houses in the valleys of Yaoundé, the city of seven hills, sparing only those with raised foundations like Blessing Tepo's. Soon the sun was up again, heating the leaves so hard they either dropped on the lawns for shelter or dove into lakes for refreshment. Then came the Hamattan, which wafted the loose brown leaves and swishing branches.

The seasons had gone by with Blessing hardly paying attention. She had opened her bedroom windows every morning yet failed to notice the dust particles settled on the louvers. As time had gone by, the layers of dust had been partitioned into circular blotches by drops of rain. Now, at the dawn of a new dry season, more dust specks had begun forming a new layer above the splotched ones.

The reaction of the wider community to her separation had been hostile. Nchumuluhans had been unforgiving, claiming twice was once too much for the same person. Church members had been alarmed. Adversaries had claimed it confirmed what they had prophesied. Blessing had taken it all down as calmly as she could, though not without injury to her pride and person. The one-month precipitated annual leave had only given her more time to idle around and sink further into herself. As such, it might be a long time before those louvers were cleaned, since she kept her room to herself – out of bounds to all children in her house. Her room had become a sanctuary where she found solace from the mockery of the outside world. The only times she stepped out of it were either en route for the toilet or the kitchen.

One Saturday afternoon, she unlocked her bedroom door and stepped into the corridor, her destination, the toilet. Another step and she bumped into Angelina who was also heading to the same

small but indispensable compartment.

‘How are you, dear?’

‘Fine, Mummy.’

‘Are you going to the toilet?’

‘Yes –’ she hobbled ‘– yes, Mummy, I really want to wee.’

‘Make sure you don’t start doing it in your pant.’ With those words, Blessing stepped into the toilet and clanked the door in her daughter’s nose.

‘But, Mummy, I want to pee.’

‘Yes, dear, I have heard.’

‘Mummy, it is going to start coming out.’

‘Just hold it until I finish.’

The shrilling sound, first, followed by the flushing sound and then Blessing’s murmur, ‘But what have I just done? Who between Angelina or me has more bladder control? I would have cursed if someone had behaved so inconsiderably in my presence.’

As she opened the door, she shamefully shook her head while acknowledging that people were not always in control of all their actions, and that judging others impulsively was not always the right way. She had read what she could from the situation, but she had not asked herself what made people lose control. She had not opened her eyes to see that she was allowing her pain to eat up her family.

‘Let me take you to the toilet.’ She smiled and lifted Angelina into her arms.

As she returned to her bedroom, she admitted that what mattered was not the mistake but how one responded or reacted to it. She slumped back into her bed, where she remained until the following morning. She often wondered why she chose to stick to her mattress like a tick. Was it because it sponged up her sorrow, or perhaps because it represented the passage of time, considering that sorrow was generally known to lose a little weight with each new day. Whatever the reason, she loved nothing better than that place from where she welcomed each new day.

‘Another new day! Would the sun shine into my life today? Would the day borrow some of its newness to me? Would I be able to bury the troubles of yesterday and create room for the hopes of

the new dawn?’

True to her words, Blessing soon followed the path to church. She now went to bed with a Bible under her pillow and walked out of her house with a Bible in her handbag. For so many years she had regarded the church as a place which restricted her life, and worship as a time-consuming activity that promised benefits to her soul. What were going to be the implications of embracing the church and all its baggage?

A child is born. He is not left to the mercy of nature but shielded by a set of rules: don’t touch this, do it this way. Likewise, the mature child does not just abandon himself to the world but seeks guiding principles, be they moral, social, professional, fraternal or otherwise. He searches for a set of rules to guide him. He imprisons himself in a set of rules. The main issue in a complex world was identifying the right set of rules and sticking to them. What then was so different about religion that scared people like her? Was it that it required relinquishing control and submitting to the invisible? Was it that they did not understand it at all and so feared the unknown? And tradition. Had she grown up with it, become so used to it that she had never stopped to really try to understand it as she was Christianity?

As Blessing set out on the religious journey, all she was sure of was that she was willingly to subject herself to the specific rules with the hope of getting her family back together. Was her view of religion limited and her objectives narrow – she did not care. All that mattered was that she complies with the demands and receive the anticipated reward.

‘Satan is often faster than God,’ Paster Arrey told her one afternoon. ‘But if you want the path of light, you better choose God. However, I warn you that there may be times when you will tear open cracks in the air in your search for God but will not find Him. Patience and trust are what you need,’ he reiterated.

Blessing did not know how much of either she possessed, but she wanted her family back together. As such, she was willing to follow the church’s recommendations: plunging further into religious routines of praying passionately, fasting frequently and offering open-

handedly. Whenever she was in church, everyone was so empathetic, stopping to share a Bible passage or offering an intercession on her behalf. The church had also decided to cover the cost of her Bible School training. She did not know what drove them, but she loved their sacrifices and so accepted them without questions. It was therefore not surprising that when she was not locked up in her room, or telling Winifred about the role of the church in her life, or digging into the edifying books which now filled her library, she was in church. In order to arrive in time for the four o'clock prayer session, she often had to sneak out of her office thirty minutes before the clock's authorisation.

Night vigils were another activity recommended by the church. Once every weeknight, Blessing would pad herself, kiss her children goodnight and head to church, where she would join her voice to those of other Christians in song and prayer. Her long-sleeve sweaters could easily pass for shields against the cold. Only, her new habit of monologuing often betrayed her. 'Even through the long sleeve covering, I can still see the scars poking their ugly faces from my skin. Such scarification, even in the absence of a voice, tells any onlooker in which camp I belong. It feels horrible to think that some fellow Christians may look at me with the same scepticism with which I look at me. What could go on in their minds at such times? Asking how I pretend to serve God when it is already evident that I serve the ancestors and the gods?' A deep sigh often followed each such reflection.

On this evening, after a period of silent entreaty, Blessing yawned and pulled up the sleeve of her sweater to look at her watch. 1.00 a.m. Abruptly, like someone who had something to hide, she dropped her watch hand to her side. She got up from the pew and started walking towards the back of the church. Unlike at the office where her colleagues had started complaining and actually getting worried about her constant monologues, she had little to worry about in church. She just needed to add a little physical agitation and she would pass for someone praying in tongues.

'To others I am trying to drive away sleep. To she who is in me, I am on a mission to examine wrists. Only two benches away and I

have already made out four scar-ridden wrists. Either I am losing my mind or we all don't know what we are doing. We are playing a game whose rules we do not even know.

'But why am I so suddenly preoccupied with scars which have been on my body for as long as I can remember? Blessing. Blessing. Why do you ask a question to which you know the answer even without thinking? You may have been a Christian for most of your life, but never before have you come so close to rubbing shoulders with God.

'If tradition has left such indelible marks to hunt me even when I have distanced myself from it, it scares me to think that the day may come when I will find Christianity wanting and hold it accountable for my failures. Well, Mefo will say, 'Never cry of hunger when there is food in the house. Tomorrow comes with its ration.' Therefore, I will think about that day if it comes. Now I just want God to answer my prayers.'

She looked towards the front of the church. The single band was making the noise of fifty Catholic churches. Paster Arrey was preparing to start the special prayer session. Rites! Rituals! She closed her eyes and her nostrils filled with the scent of burning incense, her ears with the tolling of mass bells. She opened her eyes and in place of the heart-shaped yellow flame dancing above the candles, as on the Catholic altar, there was a Bible. The altar suddenly looked bear, naked compared to the Catholic Church. The brightly coloured altar clothers, the vases of fresh flowers, the paintings and sculptures, the stained glasses, the candles, the sacred vessels. Was the Catholic Church ever really going to leave her?

After each night vigil, Blessing would return home at about 5.00 a.m. for two hours of sleep. That was the most she could afford were she to arrive at the office on time. One day, she left her office as usual to catch up with the late-afternoon prayer session. Yet her stopover in church ended up being very brief, for just as she was about to step inside, she overheard Ngum, one of her sister's in faith, addressing another: 'Have you ever thought about the image our community would have if Sister Blessing is divorced?'

Unseen, unheard, Blessing slipped away, her head down, down it

remained. Had her problem moved from being a personal difficulty to a societal concern in which all parties were investing as much as necessary to divert the shame from them? She had been a faithful wife and a good mother. She was a daughter who did her best to provide for her parents. She took in in-laws and tried as much as possible to treat them as her own children. She was kind to her neighbours. In and out of church, she tried to be an exemplary follower of Christ. So where had she wrong? What had she not done that she had to do? What had she done that she did not have to do? Why were other Christians rejoicing while she was lamenting? Where was God when she needed Him most? Or had she missed it all and was worshipping God's shadow instead, mistaking it for God?

And where was Mefo's father now that she needed him? He had been quick to send her back to life to marry Joseph. Where was he now that his Joseph was turning out to be such a disappointment? Where was he?

At home, Blessing collapsed into the sofa and remained there for the next three hours, without lights long after darkness had fallen. She jolted out of that state of unconsciousness only when a knock came through the door.

'Is someone in?'

'Yes, come in,' Blessing answered, switching on the lights simultaneously. 'Sister Ngum? Come in. You are welcome.'

'Good evening, Sister Blessing. Don't tell me you sat here in the dark.'

'I was tired and almost asleep. Have a seat, Sister Ngum.'

'Thank you. I did not see you in church today afternoon. What happened?'

'I went to remit some money to my mother to enable her care for the children – I sent them to the village to spend the holidays with their grandparents. Actually, they should be coming back in a few days.'

'No wonder I have not been seeing them in church.'

Silence.

'Sister Ngum—'

'You see, Sister Blessing—'

Both spoke up at once and then smiled.

‘Go ahead; you are my guest,’ Blessing said.

‘I was going to say that I know you are going through trying times, Sister Blessing. I just want to reassure you that God has not forgotten you. It is at such times that He is closest to you. You may be wondering why such things have happened only to you, wondering what you have done to deserve such. I tell you that God alone knows why and He knows better. Just entrust all to His care. Trust Him during such trying periods, and you will see the rewards.

‘I follow you, Sister Ngum.’

‘I am so happy that you have not allowed anxiety to slow you down. The tendency is that when someone has held on for some months, he or she gets discouraged because things have not yet been resolved. I tell you that God has His own schedule. It might require months or years, but if you trust Him, you should have no business calculating time.’

Blessing sat listening as her guest continued for another twenty minutes. Soon Sister Ngum was turning Bible pages and rolling her tongue in prayer. As she stood up to go, she left a few more words of encouragement: ‘Always be the prayer warrior, Sister Blessing. Pray and then claim what you demand. God is a generous and loving Father.’

‘Thank you for coming, Sister Ngum. I have heard all what you have said.’

If Blessing was cautious of members of her Christian community who voiced varying opinions to her face and behind her back, there was someone she trusted, a person who could look her in the eye and tell her exactly what she thought.

‘So from every indication, you may soon become a divorcee?’ Winifred Mbile asked as they sat in Blessing’s bedroom one afternoon, two weeks later.

‘At times it is difficult to fathom that Joseph actually wants to get rid of me. Does he really want to portray me as a bad woman? Is he out to bring disgrace to my family?’ Blessing sighed. ‘I gave him three children and sacrificed so much for him to the point where I almost gave up school.’

‘I hope you now understand why I always insisted that it was your life and your children over your husband’s vision for your life.’

‘Why did he have to ask for a divorce? I would have had no problem being in a polygamous union. Even if he decided never to set eyes on me again, I would not have minded as long as I stayed married.’

‘You are too good to have the title of an abandoned wife. You deserve more, Ble.’

‘But where would the more come from? You are just talking because you are not the one who has been rejected. Oh, whoever heard about divorce? I don’t know any divorced woman – that means I will be the first to many people. And I know many more people who have never even heard the word “divorce” – that means I will be a walking dictionary. Oh, Wini, what can I do to stop him?’

‘You are already doing much by turning that austere church into your home and engaging in such voluntary suffering as starvation. I tell you that God would surely answer your prayers if only to make you regain your sanity.’

‘Don’t talk like that about God,’ Blessing said in a hushed voice.

‘And you say I don’t know what it means to be rejected? The fact that most men see me only as a temporal replacement shows I am incomplete. You are a strong woman, Blessing; and divorce is not some faceless giant which is going to suck the blood out of your veins. It is just a situation you can learn to live with. You can beat it, Ble.’

‘How can I beat it?’ Blessing was now wailing. ‘How would I survive? Where would I, a divorcee and an outcast, go? Why has God failed me in this kind of way? Why has he taken away my husband? Why?’

‘Tell me, would you have felt better had your husband been taken from you by death instead?’

‘How can you make such a comparison? Divorce is preventable; death is inevitable.’

‘That is what you think and that is what keeps you down. I am sure you know what those women in the village would have done to you had your husband died. They would have doubled the trauma of

pain and loss with all those widowhood rites! In your place, I would be thankful to have lost a husband but spared that.'

'You—'

'Wake up, Blessing! You did not ask for any of this. So stand up and live your life. By the way, have you looked at your watch? It is almost five o'clock. You better get yourself together if you don't want your children to come back and see you in this mood. Remember that you are now both their mother and father.'

'Yes, you are right,' Blessing said, rapidly wiping the tears trickling down her face.

'You will look better if you get up from that bed, get into that bathroom and throw some cold water on your face.'

Like an obedient child, Blessing got up from her bed and walked into the bathroom. Ten minutes later, Angelina walked in from school and was welcomed by a smiling mother. Temkeu and Mopokou followed behind her. Winifred dished the *eru* and *water fufu* she had prepared earlier, and they all ate in consuming silence, the women lost in their thoughts, the children either too tired to speak or taking the cue from the adults.

Winifred's words were sweet and they made sense, but once she walked out and the children retired, the worries came running back to Blessing as though they were just waiting for loneliness to envelop her for them to step forward with their indispensable company.

Blessing settled into the sofa and started the one-sided conversation with her invisible companion. 'Why had Joseph not considered clandestine polygamy like most men? This is crazy. If I continue like this I might soon start asking myself why he has not hired me as cook for his new woman. What I should be doing is thinking of how I will face another day without the man I married. My mistakes are supposed to be my daughter's lessons and my victories, her inspiration. I need to get out of this situation. I need to succeed for the sake of my children.

'I have done all to make sure things appear normal to them: Their father is still working in the North in a job that keeps him away but permits him to provide for them. It will break them to know he has abandoned them and has probably already fathered some brats who

now run after him shouting, “Papa, bring us biscuits.” Wait! Did I say “brats”? I really am beginning to sound like Winifred.’ Blessing smiled.

‘I don’t know if and what the children heard while on holidays in Nchumuluh. If they got wind of any rumours, none of them has come to inquire. I don’t want them to live through the hell that is tormenting me; that is why I prefer to play the ignorance card until the time is ripe. But when would that be? When?’

‘It has been a year and a half now since it charged into my life. I did not know what it was. I never even knew something like it existed, and so I gave it several names: anger, heartache, disappointment, pain, despair, stress. I allowed myself to be consumed by it. I offered myself to it, permitting it to do whatever it wanted with me. And it took full advantage. I became its plaything, the object of its amusement.

‘After a difficult first month, I thought I had it under control. How wrong I was! I only always realised it was back when it had already invaded my body and soul. It was as if it was always just lurking in the shadows, waiting for me to feel a little better before it slowly approached and again engulfed me. It hid behind almost anything: my children’s mistakes, my financial need, professional pressures, just anything.

‘I have now lived with it for so long it has become familiar. I know it not only by name but also by description. I can smell it from a distance. Most of the time, I know it is there, watching me. I laugh with Wini but I know it is there. I play with my children and have a good time, but I know it is there. It is there just as it has always been from the very beginning. The difference is that, with the passage of time, I have learnt how to dodge. I can occasionally avoid a blow or two. I can walk by it without letting it touch me. Before, I used to be naïve enough to claim victory after a day or two without turbulence. Now, I know it cannot go until I fervently drive it away and keep it out. I have understood that the rule is simple: run or it will ruin me. I can let it destroy my life or I can destroy its power over me. Hence, I no longer allow it to step in through unfortunate incidents, but I confront it and fight back. I try to look for the positive in the

negative. Simply put, I am learning how to outsmart it.

‘Good night, whatever you are. I am learning to outsmart you. Someday soon I will stop talking to myself. You just wait and see.’

Time went by. There were days Blessing appeared strong and focused and there were days she appeared low and lost. Church friends and Winifred aside, Blessing had also made some office friends, some of whom were also doing what they could to help her get her life back on track. A fellow secretary had just invited her to her dedication into the Catholic Women’s Association, CWA.

Blessing attended the Mass in the Elig-Effa Catholic Church, the first one since her relocation to Yaoundé. She walked out of church straight into a taxi which took her to Martha’s Biyem-Assi residence, at the far east of Yaoundé. Being the first to arrive she found herself sitting in the living room without company. The sight of teenage girls transporting pots and pans from the kitchen to the backyard reminded her of those days long ago in Auntie Angela’s house. Once the girls disappeared behind the closed back door, Blessing focused her attention on what first struck anyone who walked past the front door into the sitting room. Effigies of Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, hung on the walls and sat on the cupboards. She could easily have passed for an occupant of the house, a very active occupant. With her homely face and peaceful nature, it seemed one just had to start talking and she would understand.

But was that sufficient for a modern woman? Could a worldly woman simply be satisfied by looking and speaking to a meek, humble woman of so long ago? Mary had obeyed what she barely understood. Could a modern woman live her full potential with a life laid out before her birth? Could an independent woman of the present, one who is so prone to the Eve factor – the glamour of sin – yield so easily? Or was modern woman simply a slave of the tangible, restricted by the limit of her field of vision?

Blessing stared at one of the pictures of Mary as though expecting her to open her mouth and give her the answers. Mary’s life seemed simple since the decision was made for her, yet it was more challenging and difficult because she lived faithfully under the dictates of another, another unseen. Her personal experience of a life

laid out by others increased her respect for Mary. Would she have had a deeper relationship with the woman had she remained a Catholic? Her mother always called on Mary's intercession in the face of any problem. The last words which usually fell out of Nkem's mouth after counting her rosary beads were 'Mama Maria – Queen of peace, Morning star, Help of the sick, Refuge of sinner, Cause of our joy – pray for us'.

No denying that Mary had stayed faithful to the Catholics along the course of history – appearing to them, instructing them, inspiring them, in short, giving presence to the supernal. That day of December 8th was one of many days on which the Catholic Church honoured her. It was the feast of the Immaculate Conception, the celebration of the Virgin Mary's conception without original sin. Since Mary was matron of the CWA, they had chosen that date to dedicate new members like Blessing's colleague and host.

Blessing was deep in thought when the sound of cars and boisterous laughter filtered in from outside. Gradually, the room became flooded with a deluge of people. Prayers, feasting, chatting, and soon it was time to go. Blessing stepped out just as her colleague was shoving off a car full of people.

'Are you going, Blessing?'

'Yes'

'Please, drop off my friend somewhere,' she called out to the driver. 'She's going to Elig-Edzoa.'

'In that case we would have to overload. Let her come and join Father in the front seat.'

'Hey, don't squeeze and discomfort the priest and certainly not with a woman. I think it would be better for Father to sit behind with Blessing. The two young men can move ahead,' Martha proposed.

In the car, Blessing sat still like steel. That was her first time of being in the company of a priest since leaving Fr. Max in Nchumuluh. How could she start a conversation when she did not know what to say to him? She felt trapped.

'Madam, we are going to Mvog-Mbi which is to the South while Elig-Edzoa is to the north-east of town. The best option is for you to alight here at Post Central and take a taxi.'

‘No problem. Thanks a lot.’ Just as she closed the door, she turned to the priest, looked him in the eyes and said, ‘Pray for me, Father.’

Sister Blessing Someone shook the unconscious figure arched on the pew, neck tilted at an uncomfortable angle.

‘What?’ Blessing mumbled.

‘This Christmas season would surely be special for you. I don’t see what else can make you smile so much in your sleep other than an encounter with the Holy Spirit.’

‘Smile?’ Blessing asked, rubbing her eyes and trying to focus them past the intruder’s shoulder to get a better view of the place in which she had woken up. Where was she? The place could be any place in the world, but it just was not her bedroom. After being on the road for the past three days, keeping track of the beds in which she had slept in was as difficult as discerning her present environment. Could she be in Limbe, where the Women’s group had gone for a retreat? The beds in the beach house where they had lodged had not been so hard as to cause such deadness around her neck. Again, a room overlooking the sea would not pump out such fusty breath. Her neck hurt just as it had during the bus ride back to Yaoundé. But that had been some hours ago – that she remembered well.

Blessing rubbed her neck and combed her field of vision, which went as far as the altar. Abruptly, like someone who had just caught up with reality, she jerked and went on her knees. She was supposed to be praying and keeping vigil in the house of the Lord, but instead she had given in to the lure of sleep. She felt like one of the five stupid virgins in the parable of the Ten Bridesmaids, whose lamps had run out of oil with the consequence that they missed the opportunity to feast with the bridegroom, for He came and found them ill prepared. Had the Lord come and gone while she was asleep? She now felt like Peter and the other disciples who had not been able to stay awake to pray with Jesus when he had needed them most.

‘Betrothed at eleven. Married at thirteen. Discarded at thirteen. Remarried at seventeen. Divorced at thirty-eight.’ The church was all she now relied on to delete the last clause from her epitaph. She just

could not afford to miss the Lord when next He came.

The first thing Blessing did when she moved from her knees to her buttocks, after an hour of prayer, was to look at her wristwatch. 2:30 a.m.

‘In your place I would not look at my watch. You still have at least two hours to go.’

‘I am tired, Sister Ngum. You know I could not even make you out when you woke me from sleep?’

‘You should have stayed home today after spending so many hours on the road. You should indeed be very tired to sleep with all the drumming and singing going on here.’

‘Yes, I could have stayed home, but what if the Lord came in my absence?’

‘You are right, Sister. You have to pray always, keeping in mind that the good God does not let down his faithful servants. He will answer you. He will cast aside that woman who wants to destroy your home. He will return your husband to you.’ Sister Ngum paused briefly as though weighing her thoughts. ‘But you also know, Sister Blessing,’ she said slowly ‘that if you had blessed your marriage in church, the temptation of falling into the arms of another woman would have been stronger than your husband. Anyway, you should not think about all that now. Just continue to pray and trust God. He will grant your heart’s desires.’

Blessing prayed and fasted. She waded into all her church activities and obligations. After completing the Bible study course, she quickly moved from teaching children at Sunday school to preparing candidates for baptism. Her house had also been converted into a weekly Bible study cell for Christians who lived around the Elig-Edzoa and Nlongkak neighbourhoods.

Two years had gone by since Joseph had first shown up with the divorce request, but there had been no progress since then. He had not returned to make good his claim and he had not come to retract his words with the hope of salvaging what was left of their marriage. Having adopted ‘optimism’ as her new mantra, Blessing adhered more to the positive side of the situation. And when she regained her husband, she would not just be a wife but also the string that will

attach him to the Lord. Such was one of many requests which spurted out of her mouth each time she raised her voice in prayer.

Optimism and hope, she carried with her to church and about. Pessimism, she took to bed. She often stayed up late into the night, for there was something that increasingly made her grumble. The constant alms giving, contributions and taxi fare to and from church and Christian home visits were beginning to weigh on her light purse.

Cheerful giving. Whenever she noticed she was yielding to what she had termed the 'devil's device', she would rapidly turn her Bible to 2 Corinthians 9: 7 and fervently repeat these words: a cheerful giver pleases God. When in need of more encouragement, she talked to a church sister or brother, who were never short of words on why she should not count what skipped from her purse into God's basket or towards the accomplishment of His mission: 'Don't forget, Sister Blessing, that your investment in the church is also an investment in your family. You will not need to worry about the content of your purse once your husband returns to take his place as the head of your home. You will get your provider back. Just keep trusting Jehovah Jireh, the Provider.'

Some other very spiritual brethren consoled her with phrases like, 'Some sufferings can only be defined by wisdom too deep for man's understanding. So when the Lord requires it of you, contend yourself by suffering joyfully.'

The words found fertile ground, but they simply were not enough to make Blessing fold her arms and wait for manna. To make ends meet, she devised the strategy of insisting her children fast with her at least once a week, mostly on weekends. She slipped the ration for that day into her church purse. Still in need of more, she eked out her small income by transforming her veranda into a market stall displaying necessary kitchen-stuff like tomatoes, onions, spices, rice, salt, matches and others. But even this did not move her away from a frugal living.

Christmas that year was no different from the previous. Blessing and her family celebrated without the pomp of scrumptious meals, new clothes and gifts, which only some years back had been as available as water gushing out of a tap in the rainy season. Temkeu's

godfather saved her face by visiting with a crate of soft drinks, which she in turn used to entertain her guests – mostly her children's friends. When Angelina came down with a fever, some days later, Blessing rushed to her library and pulled out her copy of *Where There Is No Doctor*. She supplemented the recommended treatment with her mother's: a bath in an effusion of fever grass, after which she smeared the child's body with some unguents and then offered her several steamy cupfuls of infused fever grass. Doctors were readily available at this period in Cameroon, only for Blessing, there just was no money. Lukily, Angelina did get better.

Offering physical healing to her children was the easier part. Mending their wounded souls, after telling them the truth about their father, was still a daily challenge. How could children understand that their father had abandoned them? She reassured them of her love at every opportunity and sent them to their grandparents in Nchumuluh every holiday. It was good for them to know there were many people who loved. The Easter of 1988 was no better. After four more months of intense prayer, nothing had changed. She had not heard a word from Joseph. As if to add insult to injury, she had decreased further and could not help noticing that Pastor Arrey had increased significantly. He had moved from driving an old Vox Wagen to a Mercedes 200. He had moved out of his rental apartment into his newly constructed villa. At least, unlike David who had lived in a palace adorned with gold and silver while the Ark of the Covenant rested in a shack, Pastor Arrey had put down the wooden structure of the church and replaced it with a two storey concrete building. However, unlike David's followers, she for one could tell that God did not so readily dwell in the hearts of Pastor Arrey's flock.

Something in her manner must have betrayed her feelings, for Dr. Mozart Fopou, now a civil servant in the Ministry of Health and father of two, chose this exact time to lay bare his feelings about the church. 'I tell you, Fatti, open your eyes. All these churches sprouting up all around – how do you think they make ends meet? And the worshipers, who are they? How do you explain that a church is born only today and already has scores of members?

'You tell me. Charm? Like Fr. Max was accused of charming

Mama and the other women?’

‘You know like me that that was just a futile attempt by a desperate people. I would not say your pastor charms his followers with potions; rather, he wins them over by manipulating them psychologically. It is true that desperation leads people to church doors, but do those who fill the new churches do so because they had not seen any other churches before they heard the sudden singing in their backyard?’

‘Just what are you making allusions to?’

‘They sell God.’

‘Is that not what Christianity is all about?’

‘God is not for sale! Salvation is a gift. When someone decides to convert his living room into a church, he needs followers. So he goes to the quarter and recruits a number of people from different social classes. Their job description, holler out testimonies of how the Holy Spirit showed them the way once they started worshiping in the new church. After hearing such spiced tales, desperate pagans have nothing to lose by experimenting. Bored Catholics don’t mind a change of scenery.’

‘If the pastor has to locate his church in his living room simply because he cannot afford rents elsewhere, how then does he remunerate his brokers?’

‘God and alms go hand in glove. The greater the number you bring, especially big fish, the more alms, and the higher your commission. If the pastor is able to defend his title through preaching, thus retaining the curious, the rest picks up from there.’

‘Are you saying the project starts as a business but grows into a church?’

‘Once a business always a business. If spirituality can be sandwiched in-between, then great.’

‘Do you know you are blaspheming?’

‘It would have been too easy for me to speak thus were I an atheist. I am a Christian and you should know what it takes for me to pronounce such truths.’

‘—make such claims.’

‘Whatever sounds comfortable to you.’

‘You know, you of all people should be the one feeding me with soothing words; yet here you are recklessly remonstrating against the church which has become my lifeline. You will not talk like an unbeliever unless you want me to apostatise, is that it? You disappoint me, Mozart, you who told me to take God wherever I saw Him. Let me tell you one thing before I go. The Christian in you should be happy that such “desperate pagans” turn to God rather than to the streets and guns out of frustration. I need to go home and rest.’

Go home, Blessing did; rest, she did not. Two days later, she opened her door, on her way from church, to find an envelope looking up at her from the floor. ‘Someone who passed by and was greeted by a closed door slipped it,’ she told herself. ‘Someone who preferred to have me read the note left it,’ she said as she dropped the piece of paper decked with calligraphy on her table.

‘I saw your note. What troubles me is why you are going to so much trouble to convince me,’ Blessing said to Mozart when they met up the following day at the appointed spot, a bar. She pulled out a chair and sat facing him. A waiter appeared and took their order.

‘You want to be convinced. You object with your mouth, but I read encouragement in your eyes. You desperately want someone to shape your secret thoughts into words. You are starving yourself and your family and dwindling away your limited resources to the benefit of predators! That is exactly how your church manipulates you. It tells you exactly what you want to hear: “God will grant you your heart’s desires. Give and God will refill your barn.”’

‘I am doing what I do for the sake of my God,’ Blessing said softly.

‘Expecting answered prayers in return? For how long would you go on like this? Three years? Four?’

‘Are you reproaching me because my name is on your salary-handout list? Are you afraid that I would become a sticker on your purse?’

‘I did not ask your opinion when I decided to make you my problem. I will not ask you when I decide to squander my money, big sister.’ Mozart looked intensely at Blessing for a few seconds. ‘Do

you look at yourself in the mirror? I doubt. I am not going to ask because it is obvious you cannot be efficient at work when you spend your nights on a pew. I am sure the only reason you are still on a payroll is that your boss pities you. That is what you have become: an object of pity.'

Blessing looked away, settling her eyes on the bottle of *Top Orange* in front of her. Mozart lifted the dripping bottle of *Gold Harp* and guzzled a good quantity. When the bottle came down, some foam remained caught in his moustache. Blessing did not serve beer in her home. That, Mozart had explained, was the reason why he wanted them to meet at a neutral place.

'I cannot remember what I saw when I first embraced the church; however, I will always remember what I have learnt through the years. Here –' Mozart took Blessing's right hand in his '– touch my heart. It beats for Jesus. But the contemporary church halts the throbbing, snapping life away from me.' Mozart let go of Blessing's hand and fixed his eyes on the bottle of beer. 'The early missionaries brought Jesus and the faith but they left Jesus and consolation.'

'I cannot believe such myopic reasoning is coming from you. But for the church, I would not be this strong and determined today.'

'They make Christianity seem so easy. We cannot try to run away from trials and want Jesus as well. If he had abandoned his trials, would we have salvation today?'

'Look, I don't know where you are driving, but you are not going to deflect me from my church. Let me give you my last word on this matter: It is good to be spiritual but it is better to have a religious spirituality. I just remembered that I have to go pick Angelina from her friend's place.'

'Today is Friday; she is at school. See you anytime soon.'

'One of us is losing our minds,' Blessing said to herself as she stepped into her house some fifty minutes later. Dropping her bag on the chair, she walked straight into her bedroom and stood looking at the woman who stared back at her in mirror. She had seen that face so often she had become accustomed to staring at it without perceiving the bulging eyes and the high cheekbones. She had thought Fr. Max, with his long and thin nose, was the one with the

problem. Now she realized her flatter, broader nose was a problem. She had thought Fr. Max charmed people with a potion. Now she had met Pastor Arrey who charmed them with words. Then there was Tchafo who promised heaven with the blade of his razor, a few drops of water sprinkled from a plant, a concoction and a talisman.

Divinity. Intercessors. Blessings. Protection.

God – The gods. Jesus – Mefo. Pastor Arrey – Tchafo.

On the one hand was Tchafo's 'Yes I can do it theory' and on the other hand Pastor Arrey's 'consolation and destiny theories'. None had given her what she hoped would have been hers by now. She needed to do something, something that was going to help her to move on.

Blessing dashed to her bedside table and picked up her Bible. With her spare hand, she pulled a drawer and brought out Mefo's pipe. Holding each in one hand, she walked to the living room and threw both into her handbag.

The taxi left her at the Ngoussou cemetery. It was a straight taxi ride from her house, up the hill, past the Onmisport stadium to the cemetery. As she made her way through graveyard, she kept her head up like one who knew a thing or two about the dead. Leaving behind the cenotaph for World War victims, she walked until she got to the mouth of a freshly dug grave. She opened her bag and brought out the Bible in one hand and Mefo's pipe in the other.

'Merge them; choose one; bury both. Merge them; choose one; bury both.'

‘What should I do, Wini? Go to the North and kneel in front of Joseph or get the ball rolling on the divorce procedure? Look at me! I am still to hit forty, and though I supposedly bare the name of a man who is still alive, I look no better than a woman who has never left the village.’ They were sitting in Blessing’s living room. A question of that nature meant the past year had gone by without leaving behind the one thing for which Blessing had sacrificed so much. ‘Tell me, Wini, I need to do something, but what?’

‘Hm!’ Winifred exclaimed. ‘When I think of the North, I think of all those rich ranch owners. What a pleasure it would be to fan off the scorching sunrays from my bare body with some well-earned wads of banknotes. Know what I mean?’ She ran her hand across her bare neck as though actually caught up in the scene of her imagination. ‘A trip would certainly do you some good, especially during this Christmas period. A trip to the North would be a breakthrough for a woman who has never visited the place though her husband has been resident there for the past five years, a husband whom she has not set eyes on in three years.’ Winifred shook her head. ‘I have often told you that when you give all your emotions to one man, he gives you a myriad of problems in return; but that when you are a cheerful giver...’

‘Stop it Wini. You should know when one is serious.’

‘Don’t tell me I look like a clown, because I know I am not one. I am your friend and you know I help when I can. Right now, I cannot help you; or rather, I cannot tell you what to do. If you have found both traditional belief and Christianity wanting, then who am I to provide adequate answers? Indeed, no one can tell you what to do. All I can say is that the answer lies in you, Blessing. Deep within you, you will find the answer you seek.’

The only noise during the next twenty minutes was the sound of flesh against flesh as Blessing’s fingers rubbed each other in the process of weaving a combination of Winifred’s short hair and hair

extension into braids the size and length of palm broomsticks. Even as Blessing braided, she was lost in her thoughts.

The answer lies in you. What could Winifred mean? What she had expected was that, like all the others before her, Winifred would use the opportunity to become a lecturer or a pastor. Aunt Angela was not for legalised polygamy since it was against church doctrine; however, the same Aunt Angela had shown she was for anything but divorce since it was a taboo. Even though her opinion had never been sort, Sister Ngum had made it known that God was the provider of all solutions. Everyone in Nchumuluh had a unanimous verdict: one divorce was a mistake; a second would be a disgrace to the family and tribe. Every person had proposed a solution except Winifred who had simply said, ‘the answer lies in you’.

‘Ble, I once witnessed a fight between two women,’ Winifred said. “‘You stand there and talk now. Where were you when he kept my BP rising with his absences and silences?’” one asked. “‘Let me remind you that I too have had a taste of his indifferences,’” the rival responded. “‘Then you should be glad he has finally decided to be sensitive by cutting off all emotional ties with you,’” went the first. “‘Now that you are so happy he has chosen to continue feeding only you with fervent promises of his unfailing presence(s), I hope you lose your senses when he also starts talking to you in past tenses.’”

The duo burst into girlish giggling. If Winifred’s intention had been to distract her friend, she had succeeded. But the laughing died down as abruptly as it had risen. Chilling silence followed.

A light tap on the door brought both heads up. Before either of them could respond, a hand lifted the curtain and there he stood – tall, darker and thinner, covered in a *gandura* designed in lavish embroidery.

‘How are you, Blessing?’ He smiled widely. ‘Your husband is home for Christmas?’

Blessing did not take her eyes off him. She could not even part her lips, for ‘hm!’ was the stifling sound that forced its way past her clenched lips.

‘I know I have been away for some time, but you know work is stressful. I have been working hard because I wanted to return and

change things around here – move you to a bigger and better house.’ Joseph, who had strutted into the parlour, spoke with the pride and authority of a man talking to his subject.

‘Hm?’

‘As I said, I know I have been missing on the scene. It was just all the work, working hard for you and our children.’

This time Blessing opened her mouth, but only long enough to let out two words, ‘I see!’

‘I have a Christmas gift for you and many for the children too. Let me fetch yours.’ Joseph Tepo placed his leather travelling bag on the armchair, unzipped it and brought out a beautiful six-yard cloth. Still smiling, he thrust it towards Blessing.

Blessing got up from the sofa, adjusted the loincloth above her *kabba* and offered Joseph the first complete phrase since his apparition: ‘I too have a present for you.’

He smiled. ‘What could my dear wife have kept for me? I knew from the moment I set eyes on you, all those years back, that you were a caring and loving woman. So what did you keep for me, my dear wife?’

‘DI-VORCE!’ She spat out the word with pure bitterness.

‘What?’ He lurched back.

‘What you heard! I will accept the divorce which you initially wanted, only on my terms this time around. I will file for divorce on the grounds of abandonment.’

‘Desertion – that is the proper term,’ Winifred chipped in the precision. Though she had been sitting in-between them, she had remained invisible until that moment. ‘I don’t know much but I know most things relating to men, especially those concerning reparation.’

‘Yes, I will push for divorce on the grounds of desertion,’ Blessing emphasised.

‘That’s right. Go girl!’

Joseph looked from Winifred to Blessing and back to Winifred. ‘What are you doing in my house, you prostitute? And how dare you open your putrid trap when I am discussing with my wife?’

‘You should be ashamed to pronounce the word “wife”. It certainly was not meant for men like you.’ Winifred retorted.

‘Get out of my house, you dirty tramp.’

‘You must have forgotten the cost of rents in this house,’ Blessing stepped in. ‘So this is my house and that is my friend. Wait until you get to that woman’s house in the North before you start dishing out orders.’

‘Get out!’ Joseph snapped at Winifred’s retreating form. ‘Is she the one who has been feeding that nonsense into your head? Is she your new adviser? Tell me, is she?’

‘How can you ask such a stupid question when the answer is obvious? What does that woman feed you? Mutton?’

Some calm suddenly settled on Joseph. ‘I see my little Fatti has developed some wings and is ready to take off.’ He smiled.

Blessing twitched. Joseph reverting to her middle name was a move which had often been tantamount to anticipated victory even before the war was over.

‘So you think you can divorce me? Poor thing! Sit down and let me tell you something, Mrs. Tepo.’

Blessing remained standing defiantly, arms akimbo. ‘Don’t you Mrs. Tepo me! You abandon your children and me for five years and think you will just walk back into our lives simply because we possess pieces of papers which exhibit your name?’

‘So you think you can be tough? Look around you and point out one divorced woman? Just one divorced woman and I will offer you half of my salary for as long as I work.’

‘I don’t need to walk in any person’s footsteps. I do what is good for me.’

‘Fatti has grown!’ Joseph reclaimed his smile, this time adding some queerness to it. ‘You see, Blessing, I had warned you about that prostitute. I had told you she would do you no good. Take some advice from your considerate husband: Stay married for your own dignity. I don’t mind doing you the favour of having you as my wife instead of letting you hang out there as a shamed woman. A woman who is jettisoned out of her marital house is not only bad for that home but for society as well. She is bad news for public consumption. I should not remind you of that, should I? By the way, have you considered what people back home in Nchumuluh would

think of you? And have you thought about the calamity into which you would be dragging your children? Have you thought about your children at all?’

‘What gives you the right to walk into my house and start lecturing me?’

‘Oh, poor Fatti! This is still my house, my furniture. All what is in this house is still mine.’ As he spoke, he let his eyes roam over her body.

‘Get out of here!’

‘Get out of here,’ he mimicked, making no effort to conceal his sarcasm. ‘Poor, poor Fatti, you need to go back and stay with your aunt so that she teaches you a few more lessons and prepares you for the second and real phase of marriage. You want to be tough, but you don’t have what it takes to be an independent woman.’

‘Get out!’ she screamed and turned her face from him to indicate she had said her last word.

She knew he had left because the sound of footsteps and derisive laughter gradually ebbed away until they merged with the silence. She remained in the same position, at the same spot, because she possessed neither the will nor the strength to take a step. Trapped within the confines of immobility, she remained inert for many more minutes. When she eventually decided to lift the pressure from her legs, it was to drop onto the carpet and curl into a foetal-like position with her jaws resting on her knees and her arms wrapped around her shin.

It would have been terrible for her children to see her in such a state of weakness and defeat. What a blessing they had gone to spend the Christmas holidays with their grandparents in Nchumuluh. During the past five years, she had been the only fountain to which they came for refreshment. They drew strength from her strength. She just needed to get herself back in shape before their return due in a few days.

True enough, the temptation to move on had been gaining ground within her for some time. However, considering the issues at stake, especially the welfare of her children, her intention had been to talk it over with a couple of people before taking the final decision.

But when Joseph had pranced in, unexpected and taunting, thinking he could squash five miserable years into a few minutes and replace them with a piece of cloth, her ego had displaced reason. If only for momentary pleasure, she had wanted him to know she had survived without him and was ready to expire the marriage that lived only on a piece of paper. In the movies, he would go on his knees and plead for forgiveness, filling the air with sweet and reassuring words. Yet instead of being washed with kisses, she had been left feeling stupid, helpless, empty and confused. It had all gone wrong!

Was that where five years of loneliness and three miserable years of waiting and hoping had led? Divorce! What would others say? How was Aunt Angela going to react when she heard that such thoughts had even loitered in her mind? Her mother would collapse when she heard that they had done more than just loiter. How right Joseph was! Though he had initially asked for divorce, the fact that she had pronounced the word favourably would prompt people to let loose any sympathy they had cultivated for her. If he could mock her as he had done, what more would he do if she decided to go back on her words?

Just then the door opened and Winifred walked in. With the compliance of a rag doll, Blessing nuzzled into her friend's embrace. Her head buried in Winifred's bosom, her arms clutching Winifred's tiny waist, she closed her eyes but not tight enough to prevent the tears from squeezing through, leaving trails as they streamed down her face.

'It will be okay, dear.' Winifred whispered, cuddling her friend closer.

'Ble, Blessing.' Someone was shouting from the door. It was not with surprise that Aunt Angela's face greeted them seconds later. 'It seems you have completely gone off the rail! What is this Joseph tells me? That he came for reconciliation and you chased him out with divorce? But what got into you, my child?'

Blessing fiercely disentangled herself from Winifred's embrace and stood up to her full height. 'What should I have done?' She barked at her aunt. 'What did you expect me to do? Adore him? Maybe cower before him for finally remembering me and coming to

my rescue?’

‘You, walk out!’ Aunty Angela turned and yelled at Winifred as if noticing her for the first time.

‘She is my guest.’ Blessing retorted with defiance.

‘Don’t worry, Ble, I will just come back later.’

Blessing watched her aunt watch Winifred, following her until she went past the door. As though abruptly remembering the purpose for her mission, Aunty Angela turned towards Blessing and lashed out, ‘You have spent the last five years sleeping on your knees because you wanted your husband back. Everyone who knows you knows that was your greatest desire. So how could you turn Joseph down? You should be ashamed of yourself. Just wait till Pastor Arrey hears this.’

‘Yes. I was wondering when you would bring out your true colours. You come here pretending, “Ble, what got into you, my child?” Pastor Arrey! Pastor Arrey! Pastor Arrey! Where do you come from now with Pastor Arrey when neither he nor his church could help me when I turned to them?’

‘But Ble, how can you say that? Did we not all pray for you? Did we not console you and offer you moral support?’

‘Pray for me? Moral support? Did those give me back my husband? I spent hours upon hours in church doing whatever it was Pastor and the elders prescribed. I fasted until I lost weight, gave alms until I almost had nothing left to feed my children, kept vigil until I almost lost my job for inefficiency. So tell me; why should I care what Pastor Arrey thinks about the solution I have found for my life? The only genuine concern of his would be disappointment, given that he would have lost one more soul to drain to the marrow.’

Aunty Angela blinked sharply but rapidly disguised the shock with composed words: ‘You have focused your attention so much on the tangible that you have become blind to the mighty wonders of the Word. No one said the road to salvation was a smooth one. Even Jesus had to carry a very heavy cross. Christianity is perseverance. The glory of the Lord is revealed only to those who overcome the physical hurdles put on their paths. When you hand over your case to God, you cannot tell him how to handle it and how long it should

take. So how can you backslide and talk about divorce when you have not even given God a chance? Blessing, I cannot believe you want to bring me down in this way after all I have taught you. What would people think of me when they hear you are considering the taboo that is divorce? Blessing, you should have come to me before ever voicing such to anyone, least of all your husband.'

'Yes, You!' Blessing spat out. 'What would you have done when all you want and care about is your reputation?'

'Blessing! How can you talk like that to me?'

'It is the truth, Auntie. Okay, maybe you don't care about your reputation and don't want the "best" for your family. But what would you have done? Taken me to your sister in the village so her husband takes me to Tchafo? Well, I have been there and I am not going back. Look at my wrists —'she thrust forward both hands '— you see these scars? They are all over my body and are a deep-seated reminder of Tchafo's razor. The scars will always be there, but I have no record of any solutions that ever came through them. Right now, I am as tired of your church as I am of tradition.'

'Somewhere I understand you, Blessing, but—'

'No!' Blessing screamed. 'You don't understand me! The fact that you can lend a sympathetic ear does not mean you understand what it means to be so let down by the person you thought was your life partner. Such emotions of betrayal and pain can never entirely be translated into words.' She paused for a while and then looked up sharply at her aunt. 'But how can you even stand there and defend a man who abandoned my children and me for five years? In hindsight, you were the first person I ran to the day he first appeared with divorce on his lips. And were you not the one who gave him the green card to keep his options open on the nature of our union? You never thought he would exploit it, did you? At least, I am not the only naïve one around here.'

'Blessing?'

'And when you decided to fight for me,' Blessing continued vehemently 'what did you do other than feed me with contradictions: "Regularised polygamy is against church laws; divorce is a taboo in our society!" I went to the family in Nchumuluh and it was the same

contradictory story. My father said polygamy was an asset in tradition and my mother swore polygamy was as bad for the church as was divorce. All of you thought only of your selfish interests and so really did not mind tossing me around.'

'Blessing!'

'This is my life and I have taken the decision which is best for my children and me. I married a man, not a name. Why should I continue to stand as his wife when I don't see as much as his shadow, when I cannot be sick and have someone turn at night to give me water to drink or ask how I feel? What hurts most is that he is wading in such bliss with another woman! And you ask me to sit here and continue to wait until the tides turn and he remembers there is an old maid here who, after all, bears his name? Either he is here and takes his responsibilities or he is completely out of the scene, name and all. After all, it would not be the first time I would have been divorced.'

'That time was different.' Aunty Angela jumped in quickly. 'Divorce did not apply because you did not even have a marriage certificate.'

"Discarded" if that sounds better to you though it does not cancel the fact that I was dumped by a man.'

'You were a child.'

'I was old enough to be a wife.'

'You did not opt out.'

'I did not fight to stay. I don't even know why we are arguing about all this. Maybe you are right. Back then I was a child and again the decision had not depended on me. Now I am a woman, and I have decided to reinforce my husband's former decision irrespective of what he now thinks. By the way –' Blessing stared at her aunt with challenging eyes '– would you survive if Uncle Polyandrew turns his back on you just for a week? You want to talk, so tell me! Would you offer yourself such comforting words about God knowing all? It is so easy to stand at a distance and throw water when another person's house is on fire.'

'Well, Blessing, I see you are not in the mood for much talk now. I will leave and come back some other time so that we can talk with cooler heads.'

Aunt Angela started walking away but stopped briefly at the door and turned to look at Blessing, who threw back a defiant look.

‘Blessing, what happened to the stalwart you? What happened to your faith which was once so strong?’

‘I did not leave my faith. It left me. Blessing, the Christian and married woman, is dead. This ... is ... Fatti.’ She carefully counted these last three words.

‘But Fatti was an obedient and very religious girl.’

‘She has grown up to be a tested and endured woman.’

They weighed each other, iris to iris, eyeball to eyeball. The door closed softly.

When Blessing had started braiding Winifred’s hair that morning, she had known they would remain seated for the next eight hours or so – the time it took to complete the job. She had put in less than one hour and the hardest thing in the world at that moment was to summon the will to continue from where she had left off. The only effort she was willing, very willing, to invest was no effort. She walked into her bedroom and locked the door behind her. What she needed most was silence. She needed uninterrupted, isolated misery. What had Mefo once said? That what one says off the top of her head is often what is closest to her heart. She had always thought that Mefo, the sage, was wrong on that count, but not anymore. Not anymore.

One month gave way to another, a school term bowed out for another and gradually the pain began to ebb away. The day Joseph had left home five years ago for the North had been a day of celebration, since his promotion had meant more and better meals on the family table. In retrospect, it actually had been the day the play button had been pressed on the final episode of the Tepo marriage – this is what Blessing had been repeating to anyone who had questioned her.

‘You know what, Wini?’ Blessing asked as they sat eating pepper soup in her living room one evening. ‘I think I am now ready to go

ahead with my life.'

'Yes. That's my girl. I thought I would never hear those words. How long has it taken – four months? Five?'

'Hey, don't exaggerate. You know it has not been that long. At first, my greatest desire had been to pick up the tape of my life, cut off those years spent with Joseph and then rejoin the tape.'

'And now?'

Meeting Winifred's gaze squarely Blessing said, 'Now, I will keep the experience but wipe out any physical reminders of Joseph.' Blessing looked around the sitting room. 'Look at those portraits on the wall. Look at that one of our marriage? That Blessing is no longer the one sitting in front of you today. This ... is ... Fatti, Fatti Fopou. Every portrait which carries Joseph's face will be buried forever.'

'Ble—'

'—Fatti'

'Okay, Fatti, I can understand your pain—'

'The pain is over. Call it something else. What comes after the pain?'

'Well, I think it is denial – no denial comes before the pain. I read in one of those your books that first, there is denial, then anger followed by negotiation and then depression. Acceptance is the last stage. I would love to say you are there but the truth is that you still have some way to go.'

'Call it whatever you want, anything but pain for I am past that; and I am just telling you that I don't want to see anything that ever bore that man's name. I don't want to see anything that will remind me of him.'

'That is exactly what I feared: that resentment would get the better of you. Think well before you do something irreversible. If there were no children to show for your years together, then I would have used my own two hands to bury any effigies of that monster. What I am saying is that you can keep your resentment, but the children also need to keep more than memories of their father.'

'I am trying to advance and all you are doing is pulling me back? Did I say he would stop being their father? Am I going to bring my life to a halt simply because I have had children with a man I don't

want to set eyes on again? Maybe deep within you are happy that we now have something in common.'

They were so consumed in their discussion, and the debate had become so heated that they had forgotten about the bowls of soup begging for their attention.

'Don't you talk to me like that, Blessing. I don't take nonsense from any man, and I will not stand here and let you spill out such trash on me. The plain truth is that you could not manage a man properly so he dumped you. He dumped you! Don't use the children to hide behind your failures. Play that game with someone like your aunt who is as naïve as you, not me. He has left you. He has abandoned you! If you want that to steer the rest of your life, then fine. You can go up to the North and even kill and bury him, but he will forever remain the father of your children.' Winifred lowered her tone. 'And for this time, and this time only, I will consider your last statement as an effect of the trauma that has been guiding your life. If you ever say that again to me, then ...' Winifred's reproaching died down.

'I am sorry about that. I guess I went too far.'

Winifred was a good friend, an almost indispensable one, but history had shown she had a propensity to cause trouble when one forwarded a lopsided view by her standards. When she got into such a confrontational mood, Blessing knew it was time to either shut up, postponing the conversation or give her friend kudos even before hearing what should be a better idea.

'What do you advice me to do?'

'Listen to me, Blessing! I know how these things work. Clear your parlour of all his portraits. After all, you are the one who now pays rents in this house. Take out any ornaments he bought; even burn every gift or item he ever bought for you. However, do not deny the children existence of their father. You will not go into each of their albums and ask them to peel out his pictures, would you?'

Blessing's silence gave her friend credence.

'Don't burn the pictures. If you cannot stand having them in a carton under your bed, then keep them in the children's room. Yes, in a carton for that is really where that man belongs.'

The two women laughed out – their traditional seal on a settled matter. But the laughter walked out of the front door with Winifred, one hour later.

‘You know, Wini, when I was a child growing up in the village, I concluded that a woman could never have soft palms, for the hoe and pestle were destined to be her life companions. Then I moved to the city and realised that the opposite could be true. My palms are now soft, and I don’t want to ever feel those calluses again.’

She looked up and did not see Winifred. It did not matter. As a girl growing up, she also thought girls could never read and write. She had realised they could read not just to pass exams but they could read for pleasure. She turned her eyes to the clock. It was 7.00 p.m. Winifred was not with a client. She had gone home to wait for her suitor, and she had taken another of Blessing’s books along!

‘Indeed, women can achieve whatever they want.’

The balcony had two tables. On one sat a young couple. When the man was not drumming his hand on the table, his plate empty, he was throwing secret smiles at the waitresses in short black skirts. The waitresses, torsos covered in white shirts and black petticoats, were either darting about briskly with orders and trays or standing at distinct angles doing sighted tours which often compelled them, every now and then, to take a few steps, answer a query and then return to their vigilant positions. On the stage was a band that had captured the woman's undivided attention, pulling her away even from her plate, which still carried the entire content of the main course.

Fatti Fopou and her companion were unwinding on the other table. Body compressed in a silk evening gown, hair pulled back in a sleek chignon, she looked like a woman very much at home in the chic restaurant. In the village, it had been and still was an open taboo for a man to approach a woman with intentions other than marriage. In the city, she had answered 'yes' to the first man who had asked the question every single woman's ego hopes to hear. As a married woman, she had walked with the symbolic 'I belong' glued to her second finger. As a prospective divorcee, she again had her liberty in her hands, and this time around she was allowing it to open doors whose existence she was unaware of, doors which led to places that clearly enthralled her. She smiled when he poured her drink; she glowed when he stood up for her; she melted when he called a waitress to attend to her every need. Before, she had been a woman on transit through earth. Now, she was a woman with an earthly mission, and she was with a real man. The square face, the sharp black eyes and thick eyebrows which arched beautifully when he laughed, the lustrous lip, the bright white teeth emerging from a gum showing off the same contrasting blackness of his skin – he was a fine description of handsome. Of all the men she had met on earth, there never had been one like him. Never before had she come in the proximity of a man so diligently crafted.

As Fatti swayed to the rhythm of the *Makossa* drifting from the band, her flimsy scarf took the cue and danced its way down her bare shoulders. Still swinging gently, she pushed her chair backward and leaned forward, going after her scarf on the floor. When she looked up, she found her companion staring hungrily at her full bosom squashed into the tight dress. Instantly rigid, she shielded her chest with the scarf, got on her stilettos and walked to the banister. From the fifth-floor of the restaurant at *Avenue Kennedy* in the centre of town, she looked down at Yaoundé by night, her eyes glaring with the light of the stars.

‘Become as light as a feather such that I can climb on the railings and fly away into the night. Just dive into the emptiness of its depths and unite with nothingness. Such would be my wish if a genie were to appear in front of me. Isn’t the night beautiful?’

‘Very beautiful and very romantic.’ Instead of the voice coming from the table, where she had left him, it came from behind her ear. It seemed while she sought freedom and space, he longed to cling to something, to someone, to her. He slowly ran his fingers up and down the length her arm. The hot breath emanating from his nose raised the hairs on the back of her neck. ‘Allow me to take care of you, Fatti. Just give me the chance and you will always look back on the decision with a glint in your eyes.’

‘Dinner is served. We had better eat before cold takes away some of the delight of the food.’ Fatti regained her seat and immediately started stuffing food into her mouth. ‘The food is tasty,’ she said in-between mouthfuls.

‘I don’t know about your grilled pork and fried plantains, but I couldn’t ask for better potato crusted grouper.’ He lifted his glass of Dom Pérignon to Fatti. ‘To us!’

She clicked without responding. ‘Enjoy your meal,’ she said instead.

The wine was good, the food better and the conversation, a useful complement. Potato crusted grouper! Where was Fatti Ashi to hear this, she who thought pounded potatoes and beans was the most exotic meal in the world.

Intent on avoiding her companion’s gaze, she kept her eyes on

her plate. But when she lifted her head, she found his taunting gaze settled on her. A soft smile and her face was back on her plate. When she looked up, a few seconds later, nothing had changed. His eyes were still fixed to her. Plainly feeling a little uneasy, she let her eyes wander about, looking anywhere but at him.

The sight of a white man dining with a black girl made her smile. Could that be Fr. Max's brother? Few were the chances that they could be from the same continent, fewer that he could even be his compatriot. Education and experience had cured her ignorance, but they had not yet succeeded in killing her awe of whites. Despite the scores that had come her way, every new white face still turned her black head. Did the opposite apply in the 'white man's country'?

'Next time, I will take you to a Chinese restaurant. What do you say? Just give me your hand and I will lead you to all fine restaurants in this city and beyond,' her companion said.

'Let us enjoy now and take care of next time when next time comes.'

'It could be tomorrow.'

'Then let us talk about it tomorrow,' Fatti said with some finality.

A waiter stepped forward, giving her the chance to stare at her companion unobserved. His beauty was a birth gift, though polished by money. With the money came class. So just how often did such a refined man flatter and feed women in expensive restaurants? And when he was not gawping at them or promising to transform them into kept women, he certainly did a good job boring them with fancy talk about construction work on his various sites. All said and done, she gave herself credit for putting on a great show – nodding and shaking her head here and there, smiling when his composure showed he expected one, feigning surprise when he constantly repeated, 'can you imagine?' As proof, he was eager to see her again very soon.'

Fatti Fopou returned home that evening as a different woman, a woman who was very far from Fatti Ashi and very different from Blessing Tepo. She felt in another's shoes, and though she did not yet feel very comfortable in them, she did not feel uncomfortable either. Would she keep them on? That was the inevitable question.

After throwing the bones she had brought back to her dog, which she had named Grigio, she stopped in the children's room to cover bodies, adjusted heads and pull out books which had found their way under blankets.

Six years had gone by since Joseph had first gone to the North, four years since he had first asked for a divorce and one year since he had come to make-up. How much longer before he responded to her request for the separation to be made official? By now, she had come to terms with her singleness, one proof being her decision to take off her wedding ring, another, to redo her bedroom. As she often recounted, Joseph's departure had given her the first opportunity ever to have a room to herself, and that had been followed by the first opportunity to decorate a room to her taste. It had taken an entire year to keep aside the sum required for the refurbishment, but when she had taken out the first piece of furniture, she had taken out all the others.

It had done her much good to stand there in that bare room, a picture of the unplumbed emptiness she had battled with during all those miserable years. She had stood there and deliberately let the pain engulf her for a few minutes. That had been her way of saying farewell to the life she had lived in that room. When she had walked out, she had returned with the first two new pieces of furniture: a full-length mirror and the decision to live her life to the fullest symbolized in a single red rose, which she had stuck above the mirror. In that spirit had she redesigned her bedroom. She had not stopped giggling as she had lain, face to the ceiling, on her seven inch-thick cotton mattress, thicker even than Mefo's.

Now standing in front of the mirror, she slowly peeled off the silk gown. She took two steps towards the door, in the direction of the bathroom, but retraced them back to the mirror. She stared at her reflection for a while, then bent and pulled off her underwear. She stood there watching a stark naked woman watch her. In the village, nakedness had been the next most natural thing. In the girls' room in Aunt Angela's house, a girl had stayed naked among the others only for as long as it took to moisturise her body after a bath. Back then, they had been young and little did they know what it meant to be

naked in front of a virile, young ‘ignored bachelor’ – by then memories of an impotent, old man who picked women had almost faded. When he had wanted her, Joseph had been a hungry lion in pursuit of a vulnerable prey. He had aimed directly for the specific orifice, not losing his grip on her until she was full with his fertile package. His member lifeless, he would give her his back, followed by his snore, definitely happy he had someone to smell his fart.

On the date with her handsome companion, she had felt all the nerves in her body come alive. She had felt like a pot on fire. A man had made her feel beautiful and desirable. She needed to see that beauty. She needed to examine and enjoy that beauty. At first, she let her gaze rest on the mirror frame, allowing her attention to be diverted by some traces of dust. Did she fear that she would see a familiar stranger with a pretty face she loved and an anatomy she did not like to focus on?

Wherever her pictures had not matched her mind’s image, it had always been the photographer’s fault for providing her with a hard copy of an unpleasant image which she could not easily delete from memory as she often did the mirror’s fleeting her. Yet, they had given her back only what she had given them – the tailor, her measurement and the photographer, her picture? She had been too scared to see what she was, and it had always been easier to make it someone else’s fault. Time had finally come for her to look herself in the eyes with the pledge to totally accept what she saw. She had been naked several times in front of her mirror but this time she felt naked, as naked as someone living in a house without curtains. This time was different because unlike the others, she was not looking into a mirror to pick out and adjust her imperfections. She wanted to stare at the woman in the mirror with the intention of accepting her, loving her. This time she was going home, she was walking into herself to visit the girl inside. She was on a journey to demystify nakedness.

Aiming directly at her breast, she declared, ‘You obey gravity, yes; but you have fed three children. That is what is most important. You, mass of fat down there! Tomorrow I will get in touch with a gym to take care of you. So invite whatever feelings you may. They will be your farewell to this body.’ This was to the bulge of her stomach. But

for the mirror she would never have been granted a view of her upper thighs, given that her protruding stomach stood as a barrier between her eyes and her pubis.

Was she really laughing? It certainly felt good to be able to laugh at herself. The smile faded as she focused at the mass of black hair at the intersection of her legs. What she saw were the main symbols of womanhood: wifehood, childbirth, motherhood. When she was not taking in a man, she was sending out children. When she was not wailing because of childbirth, she was moaning thanks to strokes from the masculine whip. It had done some good for that part of her body to take a vacation, a six-year vacation. But for how much longer?

She had one last statement to herself before leaving her reflection: '1990: The dawn of a new decade. Fatti is forty and forging. Fatti stands naked in front of a mirror and for the first time succeeds in seeing her real clothes. She sees her heart and she loves it!'

She walked to the bathroom, threw cold water on her body, walked into her bedroom and towards her wardrobe, fished out her nightgown, pulled it through her head and walked to the bed. However, she did not go to sleep immediately. She looked at her wristwatch: 8: 30 p.m. Winifred answered the phone on the third ring.

'I knew you could not sleep without filling me in on your date. So how was it?' Winifred asked the moment she walked into Blessing's bedroom.

'It was okay but that is not what I want to talk about.'

'It must be serious for you to get me out of bed at this hour. Please, tell me it is not about religion. You are the most confused believer I know.'

'That is because the others pretend to be comfortable. The majority follow my father's advice to merge both beliefs. They are in church on Sunday but at the diviner's on Monday'

'So why don't you be like the others and let us have some peace? You have succeeded in talking me into marriage. Please don't start with religion until you have figured out what works and how. I will

trust no other person but you to take my hand to any religious place, that is, if ever I become as crazy as to seek it.'

'For the sake of that day, sit down and listen to... to whatever I have to say.'

After a period of prolonged silence, Fatti began to speak. 'Who or what controls my life now? Tchafo's scars – did they penetrate past my skin into my soul? The water of Christian initiation – did it wash my spirit? Is it ancestral skull worship or Christianity? Is it anything at all?

'Oh Lord, so you really got me out of bed to talk religion?' Winifred scratched her head.

'Only last month I was in the village for the ceremony to name Mefo's successor, me,' Fatti continued as though she had not heard Winifred. 'I now have Mefo's skull in my possession. Bidding to Mefo's final wish was surely my father's way of making-up with his late mother, though happening so many years after her death. I am now the custodian of Mefo's skull. But what about the Bible, the book I fell in love with the first time I set eyes on one? That ardent desire to absorb its content had been the primary factor which had paved the way for my belated education. It is only two weeks to Mopokou's baptism, after which I am to be godmother during the forthcoming baptism of Sister Ngum's son. I am sure by the time I go through both preparative classes as a parent and godparent, I would have sunk a little deeper in the sinking sand that is Christianity in the hands of an Africans with Africans.'

Winifred listened without uttering a word.

'A skull and a Bible! Tradition and Christianity – the first I inherited; the second I adopted. During the past year, I further relaxed my grip on the church just as I had on tradition some years back. During the past year, I have tried to force both to cohabit in me, just as Papa had advised, but unlike during my childhood years, I chose simply to siphon the best from both. I chose to absorb them in suitable dose. Yet my mind still roams uncontrollably, and I still search desperately for sleep each time I fall on a bed.' Fatti paused for a few seconds. 'Where does divorce stand as far as the gods and God are concerned? Had I been wrong in insisting I wanted a

separation even after that initial unthoughtful outburst? The question, often uninvited, has crept into my mind several times throughout the past year. Throughout that same year, everyone from Tchafo to Pastor Arrey and all those in-between have condemned me for ignoring them and standing my ground. The fact that I anticipated such a reaction did not make dealing with the situation any easier. However, I have tried not to allow that to bother me, since I had long established that whatever decision I took, there always were going to be the conservatives and the liberals. My priority therefore had been to make it ring comfortably in my head. So am I comfortable with the person I am today? Am I?

As though oblivious of Winifred's presence, Fatti jumped up from the bed and returned to the mirror. 'In order to confront the story of my life with all truth and sincerity, I have got to maintain eye contact with that other person who willingly lends me her eyes to enable me see what I cannot by myself.' She placed her head upright. 'Okay, let us get to the bottom of it. I am not afraid of my shadow. Today I am an independent woman, a title earned through much sweat and tears and by the help of an indispensable Winifred, who showed me I could stretch up my hand and bring down a star.' She smiled briefly. 'So why would I have continued hanging onto Joseph's name when I could make one for myself? It is true the support he offered my children and me had been an issue at the onset. I often wondered how I was to survive without the money transfer code I had come to rely on. And somewhere in the depths of my unconsciousness, it had occurred to me that the day might come when I would have to choose between the financial security his money could provide, which did not include his presence – making me a slave to his treasures – and what I wanted for my life. The thought had moved a little closer to my consciousness when he had stopped supporting us financially. First, his request for divorce and later his arrogance – these had completely wiped out any doubts which had lingered on. At that point, I had been left with no choice but to work doubly hard.'

Fatti kept her eyes focused on a particular spot. 'Would I have felt better if the reason for giving up my marriage had been more

compelling than desertion, say being a battered wife? Is there anything wrong in not wanting to be like most women I know whose love is mercenary and who smile mostly for public consumption? Is it wrong in wanting to smile a genuine smile all the time?’

‘No my dear, there is nothing wrong with that. Indeed, everything about it is right,’ Winifred said.

‘And the children in all this? I know it will take some time for them to understand fully, especially as some kids at school call them names. I know it will take time for me to accept that my marriage has failed. Above all, I know I can start all over again, this time setting the rules instead of moving in the shadows of my father and Mefo and then those of Auntie Angela and Joseph. It is time for me to set the example that I hope would be good enough for my children to want to emulate.’

‘Now you are talking.’

‘Can’t you shut up for a while, Wini?’

‘If that is what you want then why did you call me here? You are trying to convince yourself that you have taken the right decision. That is why there is the need to say it aloud and even to someone. Nonetheless, if you don’t stop tormenting yourself in this way, then you may end up being the loser two times over. Now is not the time to doubt. You cannot afford to waver, for you have three children who look up to you and a household of seven to feed. See how far you have come in so short a time. With the loan from the Nchumuluh *njangi*, your provision store is now off its feet after one year.’

‘Supplementing my salary with the profits, I have been able to redo my room and I am planning to buy a car very soon. Okay Wini,’ Fatti said. ‘The divorce issue is settled but what about that of higher forces. The early white missionary came to evangelise, but one thing he succeeded to do, which was surely not in his agenda, was that he brought religious confusion. He shattered the solid foundation of our ancestors and in its place left a battlefield. The missionaries and our ancestors are gone. For more than one hundred years, the white man has been trying to nail his religion into us. One hundred years later, tradition is still competing favourably with Christianity. Either we are

a very obstinate people or our tradition is very deep-seated. And now that Christianity is on a freefall in the West, does it mean that the white man has been outsmarted by his own child?' Fatti tapped her foot.

'Wini, I am sure I bore you with all such talk...' When she turned towards the bed, she saw a reclined form sleeping peacefully under the bedcover. 'Good night, dear friend,' she whispered and then continued talking as though to an imaginary version of herself.

'All said and done, it is so hard to be a Christian in Africa. If it is not battling with tradition, then it is regretting why I am not blind such that I don't see the bribes offered by people who want an appointment with my boss at all cost. Would I have coped better as a believer dealing with materialism in the West than I am with traditional belief and poverty? Knowledge empowers but when it comes to my religious life, I openly confess that I would have been better off ignorant. Had I been born solely to traditional belief and never exposed to Christianity, the confusion that has rocked my life would never have seen the light of day. On the other hand, had I been born to the light of Christianity and Christianity alone, I would have clung to Christ and never looked another way. But having to live with skull worship and Christianity, having to receive the Body of Jesus then go to bed and encounter my ancestors who openly display their influence in my life, having to move from Catholicism to Pentecostalism, such paved the way for mayhem right in the minute details of my everyday life._

'Papa had asked me to take the two beliefs and merge them into one. Can the two beliefs really be gainfully merged? Is it possible that they have a convergence spot? Maybe! Rather than shunning Fr. Max at his arrival, the likes of Papa should have welcomed him with the message to merge both religions. Not merging according to Papa's vision but adopting the positive aspects of traditional religion rather than completely dismissing it.

'Tradition and Christianity are here to ease my earthly walk. Nevertheless, in order to haul out anything from either, I first have to know what I want. Now that I am sure of what I want, I have to know which I need.'

Fatti leaned towards her bedside table, pulled out the last drawer and took out Mefo's pipe. 'Mefo, you have gone ahead, but I know your spirit is here with me. I know you always warned me about men. Now I understand all what you always said. The problem is that I cannot trust myself to be as strong as you were. I wish I could tell you that I will never again give in to another man, but I cannot; or rather, such a decision is hard to make and harder to respect. It has been six years since he left. I cannot tell you how I have managed to keep to myself for so long. I had a wonderful time today, and who knows what will happen tomorrow? Mefo, I don't doubt that your father sent me back to life, and I don't know if I would have believed less in him or you or our ancestors in the absence of such evidence. You know things have changed since the white came with his God. You yourself were witness to some of the changes. I can now no longer proclaim the gods and God with the same mouth. I have to make a choice. Tomorrow. I don't know what choice it will be, but I know you will understand me always. Thank you for everything and see you when my time comes.'

Fatti returned the pipe and closed the drawer. She then knelt on the rug in front of her bed. 'Jesus, the lodestar of forgiveness, you did not condemn the woman caught in adultery. You forgave her. If I could do it another way, I would have. So don't take the divorce thing against me, but heal me and help me to forge ahead. Jesus, I don't know if I would have followed you whole-heartedly had I met you instead of just reading about you. I don't know if I would have served you better had I not had to deal with all the distractions from my ancestors. And I don't know if the conflicting experiences have moved me closer to you or further from you. I have to make a choice tomorrow. I don't know if I will come to you on bended knees again; nevertheless, I know you will understand me always. Thanks for all. Amen.'

Suddenly in need of another shower as if to wash away the old self and put on the new covering she had sculptured with her thought and decisions, Fatti threw off the nightgown and walked into the bathroom.

Before heading to the office the following morning, she stopped

at the Ngoussou cemetery. After winding between raised and inclined tombstones and mounds of dry earth rising above some graves, she made out a heap of fresh earth. She walked and stood in front of the newly dug hole still waiting to receive its human package – these never seemed to be lacking. In her hands were two things: Mefo's pipe and her Bible, that which had been offered by her godfather. First, she brought them together, and then she spread them wide apart.

'I cannot go on trying to merge both. I have to bury one, but which?'

She lifted the Bible to her eyes and stared at it for a while. She lifted Mefo's pipe to her eyes and stared at it for a while. She fell on her knees and bowed her head. Then with the speed of one being chased by a zombie, she threw the pipe into the hole and ran all the way to the kerb. She could not bear to stand and wait for a taxi heading in her direction. She hired a taxi for the first time in her life.

'Unlike Papa, who displayed his skulls on his slab, I decided I would be more comfortable if every glance did not remind me of the dead: That is why I chose to bury Mefo's skull inside her hut. Today, I have buried her pipe as well. Goodbye Mefo, goodbye, until we meet again.

'Jesus, at first I sought you because I needed you and wanted you to prove your godly qualities to me. Now I just want you to accept me and allow me into your presence, where you can do with me as you will. Let me not just keep your name on my lips but seal your word in my heart. I know that you love me. Just help me to understand your love for me and to love you in return. Amen.'

A few days later Fatti travelled to Nchumuluh for Mefo's death celebration. It was the 31st of January, feast of St. John Bosco, patron saint to Nchululuh Parish. Everyone in the compound was going for the Mass, so she too went along. It was the first time she was returning to the Catholic Church in Nchumuluh. How rich the worship was. It was not just reading, reflecting, prayer and singing, as she was accustomed to, but there was Consecration.

They were honouring a saint, a dead person, someone they had never known or seen. They were honouring him because during his

life he had been influential to his community. Mefo's death celebration was the celebration of the life of an influential someone in her life. What difference was there between honouring Mefo's skull and honouring the relics of saints? The icons of saints and holy people spoke to the Catholics just as the skulls did to those who believed in them. Was it wrong to seek the intercession of ancestors just as the Church did the saints? Was it wrong to choose as baptismal name the name of an inspiring ancestors rather than a saint?

After Mass, Fatti thought of going up to get some answers from the new parish priest but decided against it. At first she had thought religion was about rules. Now she realized it was about building a relationship with Christ. She preferred to get comfortable with that before delving deeper into what else remained to be understood.

While in the village, Fatti learnt about the death of her godmother, Suum's mother. She had died four days ago. Fatti decided to stay on for the funeral Mass and burial scheduled for the following day.

The corpse was removed from the Bamenda mortuary and transported to the Nchumuluh Catholic Church. The funeral rites consisted in incensing and sprinkling the coffin with holy water. After the funeral Mass, a final farewell was offered to the dead. The family and loved ones were encouraged to keep praying for and offering Masses for her soul such that her stay in Purgatory be brief. At the Church cemetery, the priest prayed over the grave and the coffin was lowered. But just as the gravediggers were about to start filling the grave, one of the Christians stepped forward and asked them to start with the brown earth such that the black earth be above. The black soil was fertile and denoted life. That Christian still held onto the traditional belief that when a grave is being dug, the fate of the deceased can be determined from the type of soil being dug out. Red or brown soil indicated that they would endure punishment, while black soil was a sign of a happy afterlife.

Fatti made the return journey to Yaoundé with a very light heart. That evening, she was about to switch off the bed lamp when an envelope on her bedside table made her pull back her hand from the

switch. She picked up the white envelope but for some inexplicable reason hesitated to open it. Though she now had a post box at the Post Office, it was not strange to receive a hand-dropped letter with no return address. However, it was strange that she who had never let her love for the alphabet shrivel from the time she had discovered them had a hunch about reading a letter.

‘Whatever your content, I think I am better off being aware.’ She tore open the envelope and withdrew the single sheet of folded foolscap paper. She unfolded it and began to read.

Blessing, my dear wife,

I just cannot tell what got over me to the extent that I let things deteriorate so fast and so far. I went to consult a soothsayer and he told me that that woman used charm to get me on her side. Before I had time to digest that, my mother sent me a message that I should return home. A diviner had revealed to her that I needed some protection.

That does not matter now. What does is that we get our family back together. I beg you to accept me back. Apart from being so gullible as to be fooled, I never knew I had such a treasure like you. Please give me a second chance ...

Fatti put down the letter and laughed as she had never done in her entire life. ‘Let me go to sleep. Tomorrow I will continue reading.’

Her intention to laugh herself to sleep became an illusion when the peeling of the phone came through. After exchanging some words with the interlocutor, she replaced the receiver on the cradle and squatted on her bed.

‘Have I walked a thousand miles only to find myself back at the starting spot? Is life all about reliving the same experiences in different ways and under different circumstances? Joy would give way to sorrow and then to joy again; an old project would bow out for a new one which is the same old one though in a different wrapping; a sigh would become a smile then another sigh. The same worries under different circumstances – is that life? Joseph taking me back to the diviner and Aunt Angela talking of dragging me back into the centre of Pastor Arrey’s web?’

She eventually fell asleep but she did not sleep through the night. She got up and went to the toilet, but was unable to return to sleep.

As she lay there in the dead silence of the night, she suddenly said, 'I want to find God in this kind of silence. I want to find God in silence. I want to be able to recognise His voice even in a vacuum. I want to know Him and feel Him and trust Him as I did when I was a child. He was a nice God. I was a trusting child. I could feel Him. I knew Him. I loved Him.' She took a deep breath. 'Today, I am an experienced adult. The day I will be able to hear and feel God in the confusion of this world, that day I will know that I have found Him. The day I will be able to feel His arms around me even as problems punch me on each side, that day I will know I have found the God of my childhood.' She picked up her second pillow and hugged it close to her chest. 'Indeed, I know how to find the God of my childhood. I need to go back to where it all started. I need to go back to the Catholic Church in Nchumuluh. Yes, I am going to attend doctrine classes here and then go back to Nchumuluh to be received back into the Catholic Church.'

'I know that Jesus is the same in all Christian Churches and that we all worship the One, Holy God. However, it would be nice to reencounter the joyful God who gleams on candle flames at Easter Season. I ache for the loving God who reassures through His real presence in the tabernacle, the merciful God who readily forgives in the confessional, and the kind God who offers himself to his faithful daily in the Eucharist. I want to meet God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit with whom I grew up, and I long to look into Mary's face and say her name.'

When Fatti eventually fell asleep, she looked as peaceful as a child, as a baby who had just come into the world.

Two days later, she ran into Auntie Agatha, who had been out of the country for some years. 'Your aunt has been briefing me on your situation,' Auntie Agatha said. 'What I can tell you is that you offer all to God. Ask Him to show you how to overcome the demands of society while remaining faithful to Him as the one and only God.'

'Auntie Agatha, I have tried to run away from tradition but it is only pursuing me. I barred out the diviner a long time ago and recently got rid of a major symbol of traditional belief. I took the side of Christianity, but just the other day, the diviner came back into my

life. How do I keep them in the past?’

‘If life were all about imprisoning what we dislike in the past, then we’d all be heroes. You know you have beaten what troubles you the day you can live with it as your neighbour but not your friend. And let me tell you, dear child, don’t limit God to the visible for He lives in the invisible. Don’t limit Him to a desired event, which you use as proof of His existence. In short, don’t measure God in answered prayers. Don’t bring Him down to the level of meaningless perishable things. Instead, just trust Him and know that whatever happens, He has your best interest at heart. Pray that His will become yours. Let Jesus save you. Isn’t that what they say Christianity is about?’

‘I guess so.’ Fatti scratched her head. ‘Are we ever really going to understand it?’

‘Don’t try to understand too much. Just keep in mind that Jesus saves us from ourselves, from the evil that is in us and the evil we encounter in the world. He is here to restore us to the state of happiness we were created to enjoy. This is my simple explanation of the reason why we go to church and why we try to live by the standards of the Ten Commandments.’

‘Anyhow, thank you, Auntie Agatha. I will try to follow your counsel.’

‘You are welcome...’

‘Auntie Agatha—’ Fatti called but then hesitated.

‘Yes, my goddaughter, tell me what is on your mind. Silence on a sensitive matter which needs to be discussed has never helped anyone. Tell me what is troubling you.’

‘I am going back to the Catholic Church.’

Auntie Agatha did not say a word for a few seconds. ‘Are you sure that is what you need?’ she finally asked.

‘Yes, Auntie.’

‘Are they going to have room for you? Are they going to accommodate someone with your marital situation?’

‘I have done some research and learnt that if I can prove that I was forced into the marriage then the Church will consider that I was never married. Not that she will grant divorce but she will consider

that I was never married.' On second thought Fatti said, 'That does not even apply to me since I was never married in a Catholic Church or any church for that matter. The long and short is that to the Catholic Church, I am a baptised member who, after some religious adventures, is ready to come back home.'

'Well, what can I say? I hope you have taken the right decision, and I hope you get to know God better there. Good luck!'

'Thank you, Aunty Agatha.'

'You are welcome, Blessing—'

'Fatti'

'—Fatti. So that is what they call you these days?'

'Yes, I am now Fatti Fopou. Tepo is hanging on a string over a deep valley. Let us wait and see if it makes it through to the other end or if it falls to its death.'

Glossary

1. Achu: meal made of pounded cocoyams usually eaten with yellow or black soup
2. Bamileke: a collection of semi-Bantu ethnic groups concentrated mostly in the western highland of Cameroon
3. Banda: ceiling compartment in which crops are stored or preserved by heat rising from the hearth below.
4. Bikutsi: musical genre developed from the traditional styles of Beti people from the Centre and South Provinces of Cameroon.
5. Boubou: a flowing wide sleeved robe worn by women
6. Cainja: basket woven with the bark of Indian bamboo stem and used for transporting crops from the farm.
7. Cry die: death celebration
8. Cutting grass: hedge hog
9. Eru: vegetable prepared from a mixture of two plant species
10. CFA: Communauté Financière Africaine (Central African currency), usually shortend as Francs
11. Fon: the head of a village
12. Fufu corn: one of the staple dishes of the North West province prepared from corn flour made into loaves (fufu)
13. Gandura: a full-length sleeveless garment with geometric embroidery around the neck, usually worn by men from the Northern part of Cameroon
14. Graffi: people of the North West province of Cameroon
15. Ground beef: rat mole
16. Juju: masquerade
17. Jumper: trouser and blouse-like top locally tailored from similar fabric
18. Kabba: one piece traditional overflowing garment with gathers at the breast
19. Knock door: prelude to traditional wedding; a ceremony during which the suitor's family first visits the intended bride's family to discuss the marriage intention of their son.

20. Koki: a variety of beans seeds ground and cooked in plantain leaves

21. Kwacoco Bible: ground cocoyams packaged in plantain leaves in the form of a Bible.

22. Makossa: A dance which originates from the Littoral region and is popular in most urban regions in Cameroon.

23. Mbeh: title with which a woman addresses her husband as a form of respect

24. Mejang: backgammon

25. Nchinda: palace servant, courtier

26. Ndole: washed bitter leaves cooked with groundnuts

27. Ndop cloth: resist-dyed navy blue and white cloth used by the peoples of the Grasslands as both clothing and to distinguish royalty.

28. Njama -Njama: vegetables (huckleberry) eaten with fufu corn

29. Njangi: a social and financial association of people who come together at regular periods, mostly monthly, to contribute and share money and discuss social issues concerning them.

30. Ntamp cap: a cap knitted with brightly coloured cotton thread and decorated with geometric patterns. It has a broad flat top which is woven with raffia fibres for support, and it fits snugly around the forehead and widens with height.

31. Poste Centrale: the main roundabout at the centre of Yaoundé

32. Soo: traditional male title conferred in recognition for heroism or achievement

33. Sar: Sir

34. Water fufu: ground and fermented cassava prepared as fufu and eaten with eru

35. Zouk: a form of rhythmic music which originating from the islands of the Caribbean.

Fatti Ashi died. Startling her family and community, she comes back to life just a few hours after dying. Blessing chronicles the life of this Fatti Ashi, a young village girl who from the moment she rejoins the land of the living is faced with both obstacles and opportunities consistent with an attempted murgence of two worlds. From a child who is molded with her father's advice to merge ancestral skull worship and Christianity to an underprivileged teenager who falls in love with the alphabet and finally becoming a woman who desires emotional and financial independence, Fatti Ashi's life yields misunderstandings and isolation.

As a child in the village, her life is a battleground for family rivalry and religious conflict. As a teenage wife in the city, she befriends a sex worker who encourages her to bring meaning into her life rather than simply living to the dictates of others. She takes up the challenge by embarking on adult education and becoming a breadwinner but is taken aback when her husband requests a divorce. In a search for solutions to save her marriage, she entertains traditional religion, Catholicism and Pentecostalism. Disappointment and desperation lead her to take a deeper look at the situation. Is she to stay married simply for convenience? Is she to continue following religious paths laid out by others, clearly not as beneficial to her? Is she to please society to her detriment?

The long journey of self-discovery takes her through scandal and humiliation but in the end, she emerges as a confident, admired and happy woman.

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